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# Where Is China Headed? New Tendencies in the Humanities and Social Sciences

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## Abstract

China as a whole is facing a marked trend toward indigenization. The past thirty years have seen rapid and profound changes in the social sciences, heralding a new season in the humanities, in which the study of traditional culture has shifted from the sidelines to the center of academic research. Traditional culture, especially Confucianism, with its worldly orientation, is bound to play a central role in deepening and expanding the ongoing conversation with liberalism. At the same time, however, it must still develop values for structuring society and everyday life that are as influential as those of liberalism. The three main challenges to a Confucian revival today are the ruling ideology in China (namely, Marxism), the dominance of Western sociopolitical theory, and the current practices of disciplinary organization.

## Keywords

Confucian revival – Eurocentricism – ideology – indigenization – liberalism – Sinocentrism – Westernization

In recent years, it has become obvious that a new tendency has emerged in cultural studies in China. China's entire sociocultural frame of reference and academic focus are currently undergoing profound changes, and the entire theoretical environment is being reconceptualized. This amounts to a return to tradition, and what we are experiencing right now is only the beginning of

a broader historical process. But what is bringing about this transformation? What is its direction? And what does it signify? These are the main questions this article aims to answer.

### Expansion of Chinese Indigenization

Since the eighteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, a number of rather significant cultural developments have taken place in China. Whether still unfolding or already completed, these developments have not gained widespread attention. The first one, on November 26, 2013, was President Xi Jinping's 习近平 visit to Qufu 曲阜, where he gave an important speech. A detail worth pointing out is that President Xi included Confucius's temple in his itinerary. By no means can the visit to Qufu be regarded as inconsequential, for even though the president's decision to visit Confucius's temple remains highly symbolic, it nonetheless carries great significance. President Xi is the highest-ranking state official to visit Confucius's temple in Qufu since the founding of the People's Republic of China [in 1949].

The second development was President Xi's speech on traditional culture at the International Confucian Association on September 24, 2014. The official draft of his 5,000-character-long address reflected intimate knowledge of Confucianism. Its significance is even greater, for his speech delivered in Qufu in 2013 was limited in scope, whereas the one at the International Confucian Association was delivered before more than a thousand experts on Confucianism from China and elsewhere. Ever since the Cultural Revolution ended over forty years ago, the CCP's stance toward Confucianism, Confucius, and traditional culture has been cautious and balanced: it has neither explicitly opposed nor endorsed traditional values and figures. Xi's speeches, however, especially the one at the International Confucian Association, clearly show the CCP's new attitude toward Confucianism, traditional culture, and cultural revival and thus merit our full attention.

Beyond this point, other issues are worth mentioning. The first is President Xi's meeting with Tang Yijie 湯一介 at the Peking University Center for Compilation of the Confucian Canon. President Xi's decision to meet with a representative figure of traditional Chinese culture and Chinese Confucianism—and not with influential economists, such as Li Yining 厲以寧 and Lin Yifu 林毅夫—carries particular symbolic meaning. Furthermore, Premier Li Keqiang 李克強 held a grand reception for Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, recognized as a great scholar of national studies in mainland China, Taiwan, and the broader English-speaking academic community. The fact that Li did not hold

a reception for other figures, sociologists or Nobel laureates, but only for Rao, should by no means be considered accidental.

Another detail deserving our attention is that on International Book Day (April 23, 2015), the country's leadership appeared at the Zhonghua Book Company's 中華書局 commemorative event. Zhonghua primarily publishes ancient texts: why did the leadership not visit the People's Press or the Commercial Press but, rather, a publishing house specializing in reprints of books from antiquity? The decision to attend Zhonghua Book Company's event rather than other publishing houses is clearly not made by the publishing houses but by government agencies. Furthermore, during the visit with Zhonghua, the leadership met with Chen Lai 陳來, an illustrious figure of Confucian scholarship who regularly appears at important events that focus on Confucianism. This detail is very telling.

At present, all kinds of classics reading classes are springing up all over the country, in places from elementary schools to universities. Peking University, Renmin University, and Qinghua University as well as universities across the country are setting up national studies courses, and bodies dedicated to the study of Confucianism and traditional culture have been sprouting up. They are not setting up classes in Western learning. Even though Marxism remains China's official ideology, with the exception of advanced Marxist university academies, it is rare for non-academics to set up Marxist reading groups. All these facts reveal a deeper phenomenon: the profound transformation and change in direction in academia and the general cultural paradigm.

These developments lead us to the following conclusions.

### 1 *As a Whole, China's Development is Taking a Nativist Turn*

After first "flowing east" for thirty years, and the "flowing west" for another thirty years, we can divide recent Chinese history into three phases using thirty-year cycles. First, the period 1919-1949 was one of total Westernization, throwing society's doors wide open to the West, with liberalism as the ideological force that was dominant initially, only to be supplanted by Marxism. Second, the period 1949-78—specifically until the third plenary session of the Eleventh CCP Central Committee in 1978—was one of seclusion and isolation from the West. This was actually an early period of indigenization, though different from what we are experiencing today. Borrowing from a concept in Chinese philosophy, the period 1949-78 can be seen as one in which legalist thinking took hold of the mainstream, with many institutions following legalist thinking and opposing Confucian ideals. In addition to the prevalence of legalism, sustained class struggle, a widespread class-based worldview, and

indigenous Mao Zedong Thought deeply shaped this period, leading to an isolationist stance vis-à-vis the West.

The third period, 1979–2009 (or until the eighteenth National Party Congress in 2012), focused on addressing the issues of the Cultural Revolution, with “Reform and Opening Up” as its guiding slogan, pushing for rapprochement with the West, thus making the 1980s—as everyone acknowledges—a period of comprehensive Westernization. After 1989, it looked as if traditional culture was starting to be promoted, with, for example, the *River Elegy* [*Heshang 河殤*]<sup>1</sup> television series being severely criticized. But, in my view, if the 1980s was a period of fervent Westernization, then the 1990s was a period of silent—yet thorough—Westernization. In 1998, the intellectual world agreed on a new phenomenon in China: “the emergence of liberalism.”<sup>2</sup> As an ideology, liberalism entered the public discourse only in the 1990s, not in the 1980s. Thus, from a formal perspective, we detect another transformation after 1989: while the study of traditional culture and Confucianism was now far less suppressed than in the 1980s, the movement toward complete Westernization continued unabated. At the same time, in the 1990s official voices called for the introduction of English-language study materials, which effectively made their appearance in university curricula. Economics, law, and politics departments at universities across China continued their steady trajectory toward the West, which allows us to say that the past thirty years, like the 1980s, have been a period in which the dominant ideological drive has been Westernization. Of course, at the same time, national studies, Confucian scholarship, and research on traditional culture started to undergo a revival, but this revival received nowhere near the enthusiastic support that it has in the past few years.

Following the eighteenth National Party Congress, a time of comprehensive indigenization has marked a new period in China. Yuan Guiren, a former minister of education, published a speech in which he called for reexamining the latent Western values in textbooks, which elicited a strong response in public opinion. This is a sign and a beginning of a trend that has yet to fully take hold. In other words, after the eighteenth National Party Congress, a thorough

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- 1 “River Elegy” [*Heshang 河殤*] is a six-part CCTV documentary that first aired on June 1, 1988. The documentary provided a revisionist and critical overview of traditional Chinese culture, introduced Western culture, disparaged honored symbols of Chinese culture such as the Great Wall and the Dragon, and promoted a western democratic direction for China.
  - 2 自由主義浮出水面。Zhu Xueqin 朱學勤, “1998: Ziyou zhuyi xueli de yanshuo [1998: Principles of Liberalism in Words],” *Nanfang zhoumo* 南方週末 [*Southern Weekly*], December 25, 1998.

and comprehensive indigenization phase began. How it will be judged remains to be seen, but this period has undoubtedly already set in, heralding a new phase in thought, theory, and culture. Chinese traditional medicine, clothing, Chinese characters, and much more have all entered the scope of national policy. The “Chinese way,” the “China model,” and “Chinese management” have all received particular attention. Thus, as a whole China is experiencing a nativist turn.

## 2 *The Thirty-Year Period of High Growth in the Social Sciences is Coming to an End*

The social sciences are not about to disappear. However, the rapid and sustained growth of the past thirty years is reaching an end. In the thirty years before 1949, the humanities dominated the academic mainstream: economics was taught only at Peking, Nankai, Fudan, and a few other universities and was removed from most other schools. Shandong University kept its politics, history, Chinese literature, and foreign languages departments and abolished its law, sociology, economics, and anthropology departments. This is because these disciplines were seen as Western, and from 1949 onward China closed its door to the West because the West was equated with imperialism. The reorganization of university departments was a great undertaking.

During the thirty-year period 1949-1979 the humanities were dominant, with figures such as Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Fan Wenlan 范文澜, Jian Bozan 翦伯赞, Zhou Yang 周扬, Feng Xuefeng 冯雪峰, and Ding Ling 丁玲 at the forefront.<sup>3</sup>

3 Guo Moruo (1892-1978) was a modern literary critic and historian, who served as director of the Chinese National Academy of Sciences, committee member of the People's Central Government, deputy prime minister and director of the Education and Cultural Committee, vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), member of the ninth, ten, and eleventh CCP Central Committee, member of the second, third, and fifth sessions of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee vice chairman. Fan Wenlan (1893-1969) was a modern historian, who served as director of the Institute of Modern History in the Chinese Academy of Sciences, member of the Standing Committee of the third CPPCC National Committee, member of the Standing Committee of the third NPC and of the Central Committee of the CCP, and member of the CCP Central Committee. Jian Bozan (1898-1968) was a modern historian, who served as member of the Central People's Government Education Committee, member of the Central Ethnic Affairs Committee, vice-president of Peking University, executive director of the Chinese History Academic Council, secretary general of the first session of the CPPCC National Committee, and representative in the first, second and third NPC. Zhou Yang (1908-1998) was a modern literary critic, who served as member of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, deputy minister of the Propaganda

Furthermore, pre-eminent figures such as the literary critic Yao Wen Yuan 姚文元 and the newspaper editor and essayist Zhang Chunqiao 張春橋 were at the center of the state government structure. During this period, not a single social scientist held a key state position.

In the past thirty years, a different group of academics has come to prominence, with scholars such as Wu Jinglian 吳敬璉, Li Yining, Lin Yifu, and Fan Gang 樊綱<sup>4</sup> occupying central government positions. During this period, social scientists, economists, political scientists, and legal experts have been at the forefront of the public discourse and at the center of government administration while academics from the humanities have been marginalized.

The academic world greatly changed over the past thirty years. As Chen Pingyuan 陳平原 said several years ago, the period has been marked by the emergence of the social sciences, which moved from the academic sidelines to the mainstream and became a major field of studies at universities.<sup>5</sup> Almost every university has striven to be a leader in economics and, out of fear of lagging behind, has set up law, politics, sociology, and anthropology departments.

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Department of the CCP Central Committee, and vice minister in the Ministry of Culture. Feng Xuefeng (1903-1976) was a modern poet and literary theorist, who served as vice chairman of the Shanghai Literature and Art Federation, head editor of the People's Literature Publishing House, director and editor of *Literary Review*, vice chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association, and secretary of the CCP. Ding Ling (1904-1986) was a modern writer who served as cultural director of the Ministry of Propaganda, secretary and vice chairman of the China Writers Union, editor in chief of *Literary Review* and *People's Literature*, and deputy secretary of the China Literary Union.

- 4 Wu Jinglian (b. 1930) is an economist who has served as deputy director of the State Council Development Research Center and deputy director of the State Council Information Technology Expert Advisory Committee. Li Yining (b. 1930) is an economist who has served as assistant director of the division of social sciences at Peking University, member of seventh, eighth, and ninth plenum of the NPC Standing Committee, deputy director of the NPC Law Committee, deputy director of the eighth and ninth sessions of the Finance Committee, deputy director of the tenth and eleventh CPPCC Standing Committee, and deputy director of the Economic Committee. Lin Yifu (b. 1952) is an economist who has served as senior vice president of the World Bank, vice chairman of the National Federation of Industry and Commerce, vice-president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and deputy director of the Economic Committee at the tenth and twelfth CPPCC National Committee. Fan Gang (b. 1953) is an economist who has served as vice-president of the China Economic Reform Research Institute, chairman of the Chinese Reform Foundation in the Chinese Institute for Integrated Development in Shenzhen, and member of the Central Bank Monetary Policy Committee.
- 5 Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, *Daxue hewei? 大學何為? [What Are Universities for?]* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006), 246.

The rapid emergence of the social sciences has led to a massive transformation in the departmental organization of higher education—a phenomenon generally recognized by all. In higher education, ways of reasoning emerged that did not previously exist, and, along with these changes, incomes that used to be generally more or less equal have diverged, leading to considerable socio-economic inequality.

I believe the current heyday of social sciences is about to come to an end. As of now, with the recent developments in the official state language, focus, and policy, the rapid growth of the social sciences is ending or at least is entering a period of relatively slow growth. Because the assumptions of the social sciences are all deeply rooted in liberalism, in the idea of universal values, and in Western ideals, all the social sciences ultimately are firmly Western. Traditionally, China did not have social sciences, and even “economics” as a concept is derived from the West. The inherent assumptions of economics, politics, and law all have a Western liberal bias, and liberalism today is going through a period of suppression, as it is not allowed to be publicly promoted.

The theoretical stagnation of the social sciences can be seen from an examination of the role that fundamental assumptions play in each of the disciplines. Not only are all theories of economics, politics, and law based on these assumptions but they have become so entrenched that scholars in these fields are not truly willing or able to review them and question them. For example, many economists have definitely been alienated from scholars in other disciplines because they persist in arguing that human beings behave as utility-maximizing individuals and are not willing to reform their assumptions to fit conclusions on observed behavior in other disciplines. This position will certainly not be tenable for long. And, like politics, law is based on the idea of an independent judiciary and a system of checks and balances—at the foundational level, is there really much else to discuss? In the future, these fields can continue to create meaningful discourse by addressing issues as they arise from technological change, but it is hard to see how the fundamental theoretical aspects of these disciplines can be expanded upon.

From a long-term perspective, the growth of these disciplines will benefit from the Chinese experience—they do have their own space for growth. What has been the secret to China’s rapid development over the past thirty years? What does the Chinese experience contribute to humanity at large that Western culture has not been able to provide? How can we reformulate these important lessons into general theoretical principles? These kinds of questions will be the future issues in politics, economics, and law. Everyone acknowledges China’s rise and the “China way,” but what exactly is special about the “China way”? The West does not look charitably on China’s



sociopolitical system, but over the past thirty years, China has become the second-largest economy in the world. I believe that China's indigenization movement in politics, economics, and law will place the Chinese experience on a level of theoretical abstraction that will become an impetus for Western academia to reconsider the consensus on what constitutes universal law. Such grand aspirations cannot be accomplished without at least ten or twenty years of theoretical preparation. Thus my negative outlook for the future of economics, sociology, politics, and law in China is that this phase of rapid growth has come to an end, and the near future will be a period of stagnation. My outlook is intimately linked to the general intellectual climate, in which increasing vigilance, scrutiny, and opposition to Western values will affect academic freedom in the social sciences and stifle creativity. This is my second conclusion.

### 3 *The Humanities, Especially the Study of Ancient Chinese Texts and Traditional Culture, is Moving from the Margins to the Center*

The end of the high-speed growth of the social sciences is closely linked to the movement from the sidelines to the center of the humanities, especially the study of ancient Chinese texts and traditional culture. We will be able to judge whether the humanities become the mainstream only in the future. However, signs that this trend is emerging are ever clearer, such as Chen Lai's arduous effort to put Confucian scholarship, national studies, and research on traditional culture at the center of academic research. Scholarship in these fields is definitely entering a period of growth—this is the best moment for the study of the humanities. In the Chinese mentality, achieving something requires “heavenly timeliness” [*tianshi* 天時], “earthly suitability” [*dili* 地利], and “human agreement” [*renhe* 人和]<sup>6</sup> to be in balance. Of these three factors, the most significant is heavenly timeliness, which in the case of the humanities has already come. In recent years, scholars of national studies and Confucianism have found themselves exceptionally busy. In the past, the social scientists were the busy ones, but now it is scholars working on traditional culture and Confucianism. All this shows that the movement from the sidelines to the center of research in the humanities and in national studies is already underway and that the people working in these fields are not only becoming increasingly loaded with theoretical work but are also occupying a more central space. On the eve of Chinese New Year, CCTV hosted a conversation with

6 天時不如地利，地利不如人和。“Mengzi zhushu 孟子注疏 [Commentary on the *Mencius*],” in *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [Commentary on the *Thirteen Classics*], ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1980), 2693.



academic figures organized by the Ministry of Propaganda to discuss issues concerning China. Among the five speakers were Chen Lai and Wan Junren, the head of Qinghua University. Figures such as them want not only to be in the academic forefront but also to advance to the general mainstream. In the 1980s, the slogan History's Crisis 史學危機 emerged, leading to a general abandonment of the study of history. In recent years, however, the readership of history magazines has experienced unprecedented growth, and that slogan has been completely abandoned. All this reveals one undisputable fact: the humanities are going through a major transformation. Of course, whether the humanities will manage to enter mainstream public discourse and policy remains to be seen, but at least, they have left the marginal space they used to occupy.

We have to stress that the revival of the study of Confucianism, national studies, Chinese culture, and the humanities is buttressed by a level of material culture in China not seen for many decades. Why has interest in traditional culture recently heated up and why have families begun to send their children to after-school courses to read the classics, to memorize the *Analects*, and to wear traditional clothing? This issue is closely related to the fact that Chinese society is becoming more prosperous, leaving behind a period of poverty and deprivation as well as cultural indifference and blindness. It has entered a period of moderate wealth as well as higher educational achievement—factors that provide a strong foundation for the study of classical culture. Because Chinese poetry and literature have historically been a culture of the nobility, the masses employed in manual agricultural labor did not have the opportunity to partake in this “high” Chinese culture. As Chairman Mao once said: “China only had the culture of the landlords—the peasants had no culture. However, the landlords’ culture could only be built upon the peasants’ work because the artifacts of the landlords’ culture were nothing but the peasants’ plundered sweat and blood.”<sup>7</sup> One needs to have a certain level of material wealth first and then time for leisure, in order to be able to partake in more aesthetic, cultural pursuits.

Dancing in public squares and traveling have become broadly popular, a sign that people today have not only money but also leisure time. In this new setting, strengthening secondary and tertiary education by making it increasingly accessible will make it possible for almost everyone to enjoy a culture

7 中國歷來只有地主有文化，農民沒有文化。可是地主的文化是由農民造成的，因為造成地主文化的東西，不是別的，正是從農民身上掠取的血汗。Mao Zedong 毛澤東，“Hunan nongmin yundong kaocha baogao 湖南農民運動考察報告 [Hunan Peasants’ Movement Survey Report],” in *Mao Zedong xuanji* 毛澤東選集 [Selected Readings of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: People’s Press, 1991), 1: 39.

that was until recently enjoyed only by a small elite. The material foundations for the development of Chinese culture are firmly in place. Had the shortages and economic deprivation of the Cultural Revolution endured, the situation that has emerged now would not have been possible. Recently, Xu Jun 徐俊, the editor-in-chief of the Zhonghua Book Company, said in an interview that the company has published over a million copies of *Material Culture of Chinese Antiquity* [*Zhongguo gudai wuzhi wenhua* 中國古代物質文化], something utterly unimaginable in the past. All this shows that modern Chinese people are in a position to enjoy and partake in traditional Chinese culture. This is the material foundation for the “fever” for traditional culture.

Given the new material conditions, let us look at the political dimension of the situation. A lot of people have been reflecting on the reasons behind Xi Jinping’s decision to visit Qufu, speak at the United Nations Education, Culture, and Science Organization, and address scholars gathered from all around the world during the conference of the International Confucian Association. All these recent moves have sparked a debate over the identity of the CCP and its transformation from a revolutionary and culturally simplistic organization to a culturally sophisticated government party. Moving from revolution to governance requires a commitment to order and peace. Confucian culture, with its strong emphasis on family ties, order, authority, and harmony and its strong opposition to revolution, is exceptionally well-suited to the preservation of long-term peace and stability, thus providing any government with an exceedingly strong legitimizing theoretical foundation. History, with its strong continuities, resembles a high-speed train: the period from the 1911 revolution until 1949 was one of high-speed revolutionary change, and, in order to stop this “train of history,” the 1949-1979 was a period of sustained strengthening of the ideology of revolution. The seventy years that divide the initial revolt against the Qin by Liu Bang 劉邦 [256-195 BCE] to his eventual reverence of Confucianism as the sole source of orthodoxy and the seventy years from 1949 until the eighteenth National Party Congress, are essentially the same in that, it is during this historical moment that recognition of the problems linked to an ideology of revolution takes hold. It is worthwhile to reflect upon the process through which Liu Bang, a revolutionary hero of peasant origins, revolted against the Qin [221-207 BCE] and became the founding emperor of the Han dynasty [202 BCE-220 CE] espousing Confucian ideology. According to our general understanding of history, revolutionary heroes of the past, upon gaining control of the state machinery, were faced with Confucianism’s immense influence: they could either align themselves with this great power or invite their own demise. Obviously, the successful revolutionaries quickly assimilated to

the Confucian mold, as shown in the examples of Liu Bang and Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 [1328-1398], the founding emperor of the Ming [1368-1644]. The key point for understanding the success or failure of peasant revolts lies in the ability of revolutionary leaders to cast off their revolutionary identity and assume, instead, the mantle of leadership of a feudal dynastic system. Can revolutions continue in perpetuity? Can revolutionary leaders not shed their revolutionary identity and transform into something else? A Han dynasty saying states that one can gain control through fighting but cannot govern through war.<sup>8</sup> Gaining control is the ideology of revolution, whereas governance is the ideology of conservatism, strengthening family ties, hierarchical structure, social obligations, rules, and norms.

Although the CCP and past revolutionary heroes have several similarities, they also have significant differences. First, after gaining control of the country, the CCP did not have to come to terms with a strong Confucian class, because Confucian ideology had been obliterated by the May Fourth movement [in 1919]. Liu Bang and Zhu Yuanzhang, however, both faced a strong and almost irresistible class of Confucian scholar-officials who held knowledge and power in administering the state. Second, the CCP's ascent to power occurred during a period of Western ideological dominance. Neither Liu Bang nor Zhu Yuanzhang had to grapple with foreign ideologies. The experience of dealing with the West made the transformation of the CCP from a revolutionary to a governing party considerably harder. The obstacles the party had to overcome during its rise to power even now have been only partially overcome. This is why the response to Xi Jinping's visit to Qufu or his address to the International Confucian Association has been limited to the academic and social domains and has not manifested itself in politics.

### Can Confucianism Save China?

In the previous section, I mapped out the trajectories for the humanities and the social sciences. The key issue is the extent to which these trajectories will be sustained and how these academic fields will develop in the future. The key fundamental question is, then: Will the indigenization trend be able to rescue China?

In order to save China, Confucianism must adapt to the world. Humanity lives in an interconnected global village, having left behind the bounded ethics

8 居馬上得之，寧可以馬上治之乎？Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shi ji* 史記 [Records of the Grand Historian] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 3270.

of empires. For this traditional culture to confront the world, it must become part of the global conceptual paradigm and be recognized and valued by the global academic world. I believe that the internationalization of Confucian thought is the only way forward, and the most meaningful way to achieve such internationalization is to hold an honest conversation with liberalism, the dominant ideological force in our global village.

At present, three theoretical frameworks that aim to explain the development of human society have captivated the collective imagination and academic research. The first is liberalism, which functions by and large as the cornerstone of Western sociopolitical and economic thought. The second is socialism, which emphasizes planned economic development and sociopolitical systems of administration. The spirit of socialism is captured in Marx's words that only when everyone attains ultimate emancipation will humanity be able to attain ultimate emancipation. Socialism is concerned with the emancipation of classes and of humanity as a whole and not with individual emancipation. Even though Marx's ideal society consists of free individuals, it nonetheless stresses collective emancipation. The third theoretical framework is Confucianism. Confucianism focuses on collective welfare [*xiaokang* 小康] and unity [*datong* 大同],<sup>9</sup> on human development, and harmonious coexistence. In the conversation between liberalism and socialism, the latter is now in a less advantageous position. The key reason for this is that under socialist principles, or at least under the lived and distorted application of socialist principles, the historically created mode of living and social organization cannot overcome the Western liberal way of life. The violent collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are paradigmatic examples of such failure.

Now, however, a new dialogue between liberalism and Confucianism has emerged. Western scholars, raised and trained in liberal environments, have turned their attention to Confucian theory. One of them is Roger Ames, who has attacked liberalism and its shortcomings by mounting a critique based on Confucian ideals and values.<sup>10</sup> Another is Daniel Bell, who has also grown disillusioned with liberalism and has put forth sociopolitical theories that draw

9 "Liji zhengyi 禮記正義 [Commentary on the *Book of Rites*]," in *Shisan jing zhushu*, 1414. Confucianism is different from Daoism and Buddhism in that the latter two focus on individual liberation. Of course, over the long process of Buddhism's acculturation in China, it came to be concerned with the liberation of all sentient beings; yet Buddhism remains at its core concerned with the idea of individual liberation.

10 Roger Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011).

their inspiration from China and Confucianism.<sup>11</sup> Both scholars have construed Confucianism as a comprehensive system of beliefs with real-life implications, thus taking a position strikingly different from that of the majority of scholars in China, who view Confucianism, national studies, and scholarship in traditional culture merely as an occupation or as an object of study, with no real-life consequences. At present it is hard to foresee whether Confucianism will be able to mount a meaningful critique of liberalism or whether a sociopolitical *modus vivendi* based on Confucian values can successfully complement or replace the individualist ideals in the West.<sup>12</sup>

Daniel Bell put forth the idea of political meritocracy as a viable, meaningful, and desirable system of government vis-à-vis Western liberal democracies. Taking US President Donald Trump as an example, Bell made the point that, before assuming the presidency Trump did not have any experience in governing. Bell argues that the selection process for the top leadership positions in China is superior to the electoral system in the West because it ensures that the top leaders have a proven record of successful governance before assuming top positions, concluding that the one-person, one-vote system is grossly problematic. Perhaps he overstates his conclusions, having grown weary and disillusioned from his own experience of witnessing poorly performing liberal democracies. Nonetheless, the point remains that he finds the liberal democratic model of election inferior to China's rigorous process of selection. By placing political meritocracy and electoral governance in conversation, Bell establishes a dialogue between Confucianism and liberalism—a dialogue that needs to be developed and deepened so as to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of each system.

This kind of conversation touches upon a series of important questions: Is Confucian theory an instantiation of tradition? Should liberalism be equated with modernity? Is the conversation between Confucianism and liberalism simply a conversation between tradition and modernity? We need to address these questions and examine the potential flaws in this established framework. In other words, we need to determine our theoretical paradigm and decide whether the conversation between liberalism and Confucianism is a conversation between modernity and tradition or a conversation between an agricultural and an industrial-commercial civilization. This issue needs to be resolved

11 Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

12 See, for example, Henry Rosemont Jr., *Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

for the conversation to proceed. If it is the former, there is little doubt that almost everyone will embrace modernity. If it is the latter, however—if the dialogue is seen as one between two equals putting forth two distinct political theories based on different axiomatic values—then the resolution of the issue becomes substantially different.

A hundred years ago, the temporality of Confucian philosophy became salient, and since then Confucianism has been seen as the paradigm of a feudal-agricultural society and liberalism, by contrast, as the paradigm of modernity. This understanding, however, is increasingly put in question. Pang Pu 龐樸 [1928-2015] has revealed the spatial quality of Confucian culture, viewing it as an ethnocultural formation and not as a backward, feudal phase in a linear model of societal development. Confucianism carries its own unique outlook, rendering it unable to be assimilated by modernity.<sup>13</sup> Seen in this light, liberalism and Confucianism are conversational equals.

I believe that for Confucianism to attain a global position, it must enter into a profound and meaningful dialogue with liberalism. It does not matter how much research is conducted or how many classics reading classes are given across China. What matters, instead, is whether a conversation between the fundamental values of Confucianism and liberalism can take place, as only thus will Confucianism be able to become globally relevant. In fact, the conversation between the two was first initiated by Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 [1909-1995] over seventy years ago, but under the new conditions of our times, we have to recast the conversation into a broader framework.

Whether Confucianism can ultimately save China depends on whether it can provide a way of life geared to the twenty-first century and attractive enough to compete with the liberal model. If Confucianism is to become meaningful, it will not do so in classrooms or research centers but, rather, by proposing a way of living as a viable and desirable alternative to the liberal conception of a good life. This question lies at the heart of all other issues. Even if the liberal conception of a good life has discernible shortcomings (e.g., it lacks strong human sentiment or respect for the elderly), the question lies in the possibility of creating a viable and attractive Confucian-based alternative. If such a way of life can be put forth, then Confucianism will become robust, vigorous, and globally relevant, as it was during the Tang dynasty [618-907]. At that time, Chang'an, the capital of the Tang, was a magnet for non-Chinese people from the world over who, drawn by the Chinese way of life, flocked to the city in pursuit of a life based on Confucian ideals and practices. The Tang

13 See Pang Pu 龐樸, *Wenhua de minzuxing yu xiandaixing* 文化的民族性與現代性 [*The National and Temporal Quality of Culture*] (Beijing: Zhongguo heping chubanshe, 1988).



dynasty had the same allure that the United States has now: people eagerly migrate there to study, work, and ultimately adopt in full or in part a different way of life. In the modern world, Korea and Japan are the two societies that come closest to a Confucian way of living. Whether we can learn and build upon their example to erect a polity of rite and propriety will be of the utmost importance to Confucianism's future.

I have always stressed that we need to rebuild China as a polity of rites and propriety, and it is my belief that to do so we must start by rebuilding Shandong—Confucius's birthplace—not only as a place of rites and propriety but also as a place of humaneness. Shandong University Professor Zeng Zhenyu 曾振宇 has repeatedly argued for the designation of Qufu as a special cultural zone in which a Confucian way of living is re-established. Professor Wang Yimin's 王益民 article “Traditional Chinese Culture and the East Asian Ethical Market Economy” argues that China's market economy has not unfolded following the patterns of the West but, rather, following Confucian ethical principles and providing a sense of humanity in an otherwise impersonal market economy.<sup>14</sup> The goal is to strike the perfect balance between Confucian values and sensitivities, on the one hand, and the egalitarian spirit of socialism or the respect for individuality and privacy afforded by liberalism, on the other.

All the above is premised on my expectation of a Confucian revival. The critical spirit of my profession compels me to acknowledge the problems with a possible Confucian revival.<sup>15</sup> Can a Confucian revival happen in a sensible and balanced way, avoiding the clutches of blind fanaticism? If we agree that blind fanaticism is not good—and we should be able to agree to that—are entirely Eurocentric or Sinocentric values also not problematic? We all have to retain a sober and dispassionate attitude and exhibit the rationality that should define the educated public. We cannot act in the ways or reflect the sentiment of uneducated multitudes, such as die-hard fanatics smashing Japanese products on the streets. Erudition entails a humanistic attitude of universality and a sense of rationality strong enough to restrain one's nationalist biases. Thus, we can hope to appreciate the bigger picture of every issue and to be able to foresee the possible dangers that each trend entails.

14 Lin Zirong 蔺子荣 and Wang Yimin 王益民, “Zhongguo chuantong wenhua yu dongfang lunlixing shichang jingji 中國傳統文化與東方倫理型市場經濟 [Chinese Traditional Culture and the East Asian Ethical Market Economy],” *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 中國社會科學 [*China Social Sciences*], 1 (1995).

15 Richard Wolin, “Under Western Eyes: Critical Reflections on the Confucian Revival,” *Journal of Chinese Humanities*, 1, no. 2 (2015).



The foregoing constitutes the paper's second point on how Confucianism can become globally relevant. Despite the problems with certain attitudes and practices as sketched above, I remain optimistic about Confucianism's potential ability to influence the global intellectual mainstream with its "sense and sensibility."

### Three Challenges for the Revival of Confucian and National Studies

What does the revival of Confucian and national studies entail? I believe the revival of Confucian and national studies along with the reinvigoration of traditional culture has to face the following three challenges: the ideological dominance of Marxism, a Eurocentric conceptual paradigm, and the current disciplinary setting.

President Xi's discourses on Confucianism and traditional culture have elicited a great response from the Chinese public. However, his talks are not just about Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture. Rather, they stress the relationship between Marxism and Confucianism.

Since this 2014, the editorial board of the *Journal of Literature, History, and Philosophy* [Wenshixue 文史哲] and *China Reading Weekly* [Zhonghua dushubao 中華讀書報] have jointly published "The 2014 Annual Key Issues in the Chinese Humanities."<sup>16</sup> Our intention is to participate in the process of taking the humanities into the academic mainstream to deepen the conversations in which the humanities are engaged. After comprehensive deliberation, the editorial board of the *Journal of Literature, History, and Philosophy* decided to place the emphasis of the list and its discussion on the public reaction to President Xi's speeches, believing that this would once again raise the issue of the Confucian-Marxist debate and attract further attention to the issue.

In other words, it is not important to discuss Confucianism for Confucianism's sake but, rather, to analyze its relationship with Marxism—a question that has plagued "New" China since the very beginning. President Xi has repeatedly stressed the significance of dialectical materialism and the values of Marxism, but this has not discouraged many fellow academics from calling for the ideological substitution of Marxism with Confucianism—a controversial statement from which we should not shy away but, rather, engage

16 "2014 niandu Zhongguo renwen xueshu shida redian 2014 年度中國人文學術十大熱點 [The 2014 Annual Key Issues in the Chinese Humanities]," *Zhonghua dushubao* 中華讀書報 [*China Reading Weekly*], June 5, 2015; [www.journalofchinesehumanities.com/uncategorized/top-ten-developments-in-the-studies-of-chinese-humanities-in-2014/](http://www.journalofchinesehumanities.com/uncategorized/top-ten-developments-in-the-studies-of-chinese-humanities-in-2014/).

with critically. Put bluntly, I do not agree with this position and do not believe that Confucianism should grow at the expense of Marxism. Marxism's capacity to deliver a resolution to our collective and individual predicament is outside the scope of this paper. What I argue is that Marxism still provides the strongest analytical framework, thanks to which we can make sense of the massive transformative changes currently taking place in China, and that this framework is much more suitable than a liberal or Confucian worldview. It still has theoretical merits and practical advantages and should therefore not be discarded in the name of a Confucian revival.

At the heart of the Confucian revival question are two fundamental issues. The first is its essence vis-à-vis its commensurability with Marxism—a question that has been present in academic circles since the 1990s and has become increasingly significant. In several articles published before the eighteenth National Party Congress, the historian Lin Ganquan strongly opposed the Confucianization of China as well as Marxism.<sup>17</sup> However, a sizable part of today's academic world aims to show the compatibility of Marxism with Confucianism and argues that not only has this mix indeed been the “Chinese Way,” determining the quintessential Chinese experience, but also, emboldened by skepticism and derision from the West, that this should be the model for the future. Despite the increasing amount of scholarship and hard work devoted to these issues, it remains to be seen how a theoretical equilibrium can be found. What can be seen, however, is that the issue of ideological dominance, even if it happens to become less compelling in the future, will continue to consume a group of determined academics. This group of academics believes that Marxism's emphasis on class struggle, violent revolution, elimination of private property, and proletarian dictatorship, is neither humane nor benevolent, not Confucian, and therefore not desirable. From this perspective, their thinking is rational. Of course, real tragedies do not lie in the conflict between good and evil but in the conflict between two different conceptions of the good. Each side has its rationality, but the two cannot be fully compatible. Finding the ways in which the two systems can be rendered compatible, striking a coherent and advantageous balance, is at the heart of this daunting intellectual challenge.

17 Lin Ganquan 林甘泉, “Ruhua Zhongguo xingbutong 儒化中國行不通 [Confucianizing China Will Not Work],” *Beijing Ribao* 北京日報 [*Beijing Daily*], December 10, 2007; idem, “Kongzi yu 20 shiji Zhongguo 孔子與20世紀中國 [Confucius and Twentieth-Century China],” *Zhexue yanjiu* 哲學研究 [*Philosophical Investigations*], 7 (2008).

The second challenge with which a Confucian revival has to come to terms is Eurocentrism. The challenges of Eurocentrism are not new, and the academic world, in China as well as in the West, wrestled with this issue quite early. In China, however, the issue has taken an existential dimension since it is closely linked to a collective sense of national pride. The TV political documentary *River Elegy* was a classic example of total Westernization, calling for the abandonment of the Yellow River (i.e., Chinese) civilization, as it stood for the cultural paradigm of a backward and corrupt agricultural nation, waiting to be superseded by Western culture. The documentary's approach was in favor of complete Westernization and strongly opposed Confucianism and traditional Chinese culture. In response to the challenges raised by Eurocentrism, since 1989 the Zhonghua Book Company has been printing Paul Cohen's *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*, which aims to dissociate the idea of modernization from Westernization as well as problematize the significance that Western historians have placed on a specific set of "Western" concerns and issues when tackling Chinese history. The comprehensive Westernization in the 1980s certainly had a Eurocentric ideology as its theoretical foundation—a foundation that continued in the 1990s despite the revival of national studies. I pointed out above that in the 1990s liberalism became entrenched in Chinese academia. Theoretically, however, the issue with comprehensive Westernization begins with the concept of universal values.<sup>18</sup>

At the core of Western-centric theory is the idea that the Western experience constitutes the norm. The result of the Euro-American experience is normal, general, and standard, and everything that is not the result of that experience is particular, special, and deviant. The Western developmental path is *the* path; China's developmental path is a deviation that always needs to be qualified by the adjective Chinese. In this framework, which, despite the postcolonial critique, still strongly informs Western discourse and practice, the relationship between the West and China is one between the general and the particular, between universal law and circumstantial specificities. What

18 The expression "universal values" [*pushi jiazhi* 普世價值] has received a lot of attention in China, starting with an article published in *Nanfang zhoubao* 南方週末 [*Southern Weekly*], which stated that "the government is doing its best to honor its commitment to its people and the world to put in effect its commitment to universal values." This article sparked a great controversy over the idea of "universal values." See *Nanfang zhoubao*, "Wenchuan zhentong zhenchu yige xin Zhongguo 汶川震痛，震出一個新中國 [The Pain of the Wenchuan Earthquake: Toward a New China]," May 23, 2008.

has been called central in the past has now been doubted and deconstructed and the dynamic between the West and the rest has been criticized and even replaced by a Sinocentric view that places China in the realm of generality and universal law and the West (and everyone else) at the level of specificity and circumstance. Indeed, most liberals in China think that liberalism and Confucianism are not incongruous with each other but, rather, can be brought together in creative unison. Opposition to a completely Western-centric ideology has become the consensus of the intellectual world.

The third and final challenge with which a Confucian revival needs to grapple is the challenge posed by the current disciplinary structures of departmental and curricula divisions. The current university disciplinary division is completely Western: Chinese, history, philosophy, politics, law, economics, anthropology, and sociology are all thoroughly Western. Chinese universities' disciplinary framework and departmental divisions are all wholly imported from the West. This obviously has methodological benefits, for it is necessary to differentiate knowledge into different branches, such as physics, chemistry, and biology. But what might be easier to resolve in the natural sciences is poignantly problematic in the humanities because China traditionally did not employ the Western categorical structure but, rather, used the fourfold *Sibu* [四部] classification of classics, history, masters, and belles-lettres [*jing shi zi ji* 經史子集]. With the exception of history, all the other divisions have to go through a series of intermediate conceptual links in order to fit into the Western categorical division.

A grave concern in using modern academic categories to study Chinese humanities is that it leads to a dismemberment of classical Chinese scholarship and thought. For example, are Confucius's *Analects* history? Literature? Philosophy? Or maybe politics? Anyone even superficially familiar with the text will recognize that it is all of the above and does not fit nicely into any one of these categories. To take more examples from traditional Chinese learning, where should playing musical instruments and chess or doing calligraphy and painting, or even the classics or masters divisions of the *Sibu* system, be placed in the modern academic disciplines? The current disciplinary division forces a structure on the study of traditional Chinese culture that, until its introduction in the early twentieth century, simply did not exist: Confucian studies were comprehensive and holistic. The Chinese, philosophy, and history departments research Confucianism in their own specialized way, and in practice their work remains divided. The current disciplinary division has imposed an unquestioned structure to the study of Confucian thought that leads to the dismemberment of a previously unitary whole. Therefore, an important problem that all academics engaged in Confucian and national studies have

to resolve is the limitation imposed by the current departmental division. Too many organizational issues cannot be resolved, and the categorical concepts raised by national studies can cast doubt and help reform the current disciplinary divisions.

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