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# Top Ten Developments in Studies on Chinese Humanities in 2016

## 1 The Philosophy and Social Sciences Symposium Is Held in Beijing, Indigenization Gradually Becomes the New Top Priority in Humanities

In the past forty years, the distinctive path China has followed allowed it to rise to the status of a world power. Chinese characteristics, such as the state's institutional planning and socialist structure, had a spillover effect, invalidating several conclusions in social sciences that had previously been assumed "universal," even though they were based on the West's historical experience. Following this historical shift, the paradigms and frameworks offered by Western science gradually came to be considered less effective when it came to interpreting the Chinese experience. Chinese humanities and social sciences slowly turned toward valuing China's realities and idiosyncrasies. Since then, the "real China" has been rediscovered, and new theoretical models based on scientific principles have been elaborated to better reflect Chinese realities. Furthermore, scholars have also recognized China's urgent need for an ideological, scientific, and cultural discursive power and soft power that would match, on a global scale, its economic status.

In view of these recent developments, the Philosophy and Social Sciences Symposium was held in Beijing on May 17, 2016. President Xi Jinping attended and emphasized, first, that scholars in philosophy and social sciences had to concentrate their efforts on constructing theoretical systems that incorporate Chinese characteristics; second, that conceptual categories had to be refined to better reflect Chinese realities; and, third, that the focus should be on ideologies that promote the indigenization of academia. Following this event, ideological movements concerned with academic indigenization have started to sweep the humanities and social sciences.

## 2 The End of “The Anxiety of Influence”: Chinese Contemporary Literature Enters the Canon

In April 2016, Cao Wenxuan 曹文軒 was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Award, and in August, Hao Jingfang 郝景芳 won the Hugo Award for Best Novelette with *Beijing zhedie* 北京折疊 [*Folding Beijing*]. In 2012, Mo Yan 莫言 won the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 2014 Yan Lianke 閻連科 received the Franz Kafka Prize, and in 2015 Li Cixin won the Hugo Award for Best Novel for *San Ti* 三體 [*The Three-Body Problem*]<sup>1</sup>—all of which are among the world’s most prestigious awards. Recognition from the Western and mainstream literary scene, which showed that these writers’ skills enabled them to enter the canon, has allowed Chinese writers to overcome an “anxiety of influence” that had plagued the Chinese literary world. The question of how contemporary literature could eventually be incorporated in the literary canon became an important topic of literary research in 2016. Numerous writers and scholars discussed subjects such as the standards of contemporary Chinese literature, its position in history, practical questions involved in it, and its future. Works such as *Wenhua de zhuangui*—“*Lu Guo Mao Ba Lao Cao*” *zai Zhongguo* 文化的轉軌——“魯郭茅巴老曹”在中國 (1949–1981) [*Cultural Reforms: “Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Lao She, and Cao Yu” in the History of China (1949–1981)*] and *Cailiao yu zhushi* 材料與注釋 [*Material and Annotations*] highlight the efforts made in this new direction. Chinese literature is opening up to the world, making it increasingly apparent that contemporary literary history will have to take into account China’s contribution.

## 3 The “Unity of Knowledge and Action” Draws Attention Once Again, Heralding a New Era for the School of Mind

In 2016, after the first session of “Human Intelligence and Our Common Future: The Chinese Yangming School of Mind Summit,” several similar conferences were held. Research institutes dedicated to the Yangming school were established in various locations, emphasizing the reappearance of the School of Mind [Xinxue 心學], as well as the “unity of knowledge and action” [*zhixing yiti* 知行一體] and the principle that “to know and not to transform this knowledge into action amounts to not knowing at all.” Because it was considered a typical example of “subjective idealism,” Wang Yangming’s work was subjected to strict censure in the early days of the Chinese republic. However, to conceive the mind as the root of philosophy actually enables us to unravel the relationship between knowledge and action. For this reason, the School of Mind has

been considered more practical than the School of Principle [Lixue 理學], to the point that one scholar, Jia Qingjun, in 2010 claimed that “Wang Yangming’s School of Mind is in fact what ‘true learning’ is.” Since the 1980s, numerous streams of thought have emerged and competed with one another. Although this contributed to creating a vibrant intellectual atmosphere, the proliferation of intellectual debate has also been criticized for having brought a dangerous “decline in values” and for making people think that “theory was disconnected from reality.” While it is true that meaningless theoretical prose that cannot be considered to possess “true learning,” the national resurgence also necessitates an impetus that will galvanize the people’s spirit. Moreover, welfare must be sustained and expanded to more people by applying this “unity of knowledge and action.” In view of these needs, Wang’s philosophical thought, which is considered the sublimation of the Confucian spirit of governing pragmatically, has been rehabilitated, marking the beginning of a new era for the School of Mind.

#### 4 Examining Lu Xun’s Legacy and Perpetuating a Tradition of Enlightenment

The 135th anniversary of Lu Xun’s 魯迅 birth and the eightieth anniversary of his death were marked in 2016, making memorial activities in his honor the cultural hot topic of the year. For the first time since his status as a cultural symbol of the 1930s’ revolutionary ideology was dismantled, that is, since he was demoted from his position as “the saint of modern China,” Lu Xun once again became the focus of attention in the media as well as in academia and art. Commemorative activities were characterized by the involvement of academic institutions, which provided the stage for activities led by citizens and concentrated on responding to practical, contemporary issues. This demonstrates that, even though the “decline of ideological thinking and rise of science” was proclaimed by Li Zehou at the end of the twentieth century, the scholarly tradition in which contemporary intellectuals can, following Lu Xun’s example, contemplate society and the human experience from a highly theoretical perspective, while at the same time being involved in real practical changes, has not yet disappeared. Throughout the year, various questions relating to these commemorative activities were also addressed in written documents. These questions included Lu Xun’s role in the Chinese development path and its relation to modern revolutions and communism; his role in the cultural resurgence and its relation to both nationalism and criticism of tradition; and his role in understanding the relation between cultural exchanges,

“mechanical borrowing” from other cultures and the notion of being a “world citizen.” All these commemorative activities proceeded from a dialogue and mutual understanding between cultures and revisited the century-old tradition of research on Lu Xun, while at the same time acknowledging the valuable contribution of other cultures and looking critically at the harmful practices in traditional Chinese culture. This process has clearly shown the persistence of the contemporary tradition of enlightenment, which had previously seemed to be on the verge of disappearing.

## 5      **The Creation of the Shanghai Institute of Confucian Studies: Attempts to Reconcile Confucianism and the Market Enter a New Phase**

On September 3, 2016, Fudan University’s School of Philosophy officially announced the creation of the Shanghai Institute of Confucian Studies, and, because of the new institute’s geographic location, it provoked many reactions throughout academic circles. If commerce has been regarded as one of the two main engines of modernity, Confucianism always had, at its core, the guiding principle that “One should pursue righteousness, and not one’s own interests,” a principle that led thinkers such as Max Weber to believe that Confucianism lacked the ability to develop a market economy. Since the 1980s, a market economy with Chinese characteristics has been established and has experienced remarkable growth, but, at the same time, people long for traditional culture, including Confucianism, to be allowed a place in society. As a result, the need to reorient the relationship between Confucianism and the market has become an important issue. Shanghai, as the Chinese city that underwent the highest degree of Westernization and modernization experiments, is regaining its title as a “bustling city that welcomes foreigners.” Since the economic reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping, Shanghai has led the modernization of the mainland. As such, a mentality that understands the logic of capital and the privileges it entails has already been infused into the veins of this city’s culture. In the context of the creation of a market economy in China, Shanghai is still considered the most modern and the most flourishing metropolis. The fact that the founding of a Confucian Studies Institute at the city’s most important institution of higher learning was met with such interest endows it with great status. This not only carries strong symbolism but also signifies that, when it comes to interactions between the market and Confucianism, a new chapter may be about to begin.

## 6 Liberalism Faces Widespread Skepticism, and an Important Change of Climate in Academia Ensues

Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has emerged as the main ideological trend in Western countries. As an ideology, it is based on the firm belief that a liberal and democratic system is a decisive factor in achieving good governance and preserving a dynamic economy and that the future of all societies across the globe depends on its application. However, in recent years, practices of social governance based on liberal concepts have brought to light the system's lack of efficacy, and its consequent loss of legitimacy provoked an unprecedented global crisis of confidence in liberal values. The Brexit referendum (in which Great Britain is giving up its membership in the European Union), the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States, and the refugee problem in Germany were all regarded as the cumulative manifestation of the failures of neoliberal globalization.

This trend is present in the Chinese academic world as well and was made apparent by the challenges it posed in every social science discipline that used to be dominated by liberal ideology. The "intellectual colonization" of China, in which liberalism came to define the fundamental postulates of the social sciences, has increasingly been called into question. Moreover, if this kind of criticism arose mainly in the social sciences, it is currently reaching the humanities, which illustrates a transition occurring in the academic world. For this reason, many disciplines are now facing the historical task of readjusting their postulates and re-evaluating their standards.

## 7 Bell's *China Model* Is Published, Leading to a Global Debate on Chinese Politics

From the introduction of Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s to the early twenty-first century, China has followed a trajectory of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and entry into the market economy. The strength of its economy has increased at an unprecedented speed, attracting intense international attention. People have also been deeply interested in discovering the causes for this emergence, and, for this reason, China's unique model of politics and government has become the focus of world attention. At the same time, shifts in European and American politics, which are still defined mainly by their electoral systems, recently became apparent: nationalism and populism are increasingly prevalent, and, as such, the legitimacy of the Western democratic

model, which is based on universal suffrage, has encountered unprecedented challenges. It is against this background that Canadian political scientist Daniel A. Bell's book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, which came out in English in 2015, was translated into Chinese in 2016 as *Xianneng zhengzhi: weishenme shang xian zhi bi xuanju minzhu zhi geng shihe Zhongguo* 賢能政治——為什麼尚賢制比選舉民主制更適合中國. Bell has a clear opinion on Chinese politics and argues that, according to widely acknowledged good governance standards, democratic elections may not necessarily be a better option than the current meritocratic system. In fact, meritocracy, which has its origins in Chinese traditional political culture, may be more suited to great powers such as China, because it can effectively avoid the shortcomings of the Western electoral system. In China and elsewhere, this theory provoked an intense controversy as soon as it was published, and people proceeded to question both systems' strengths and weaknesses. As a result, the future of the Chinese model of political governance became the subject of even more discussion throughout the world. Moreover, following the outpouring of enthusiasm for Bell's book and because the premises supporting this "meritocracy" are deeply rooted in Confucian culture, political thought in Confucian doctrine also became the object of widespread interest.

## 8 *The New History of Modern China Written by Scholars across the Strait Comes Out, Making It Possible to Incorporate Different Views of History*

History is always written by individuals. If objectivity enables writers to establish their credibility, objectivity itself cannot prevent the powerful influence of more subjective points of view. Because these may differ from one historian to another, the features highlighted in their writing may also be completely different, even though they refer to the same period of history. In the past, versions of recent Chinese history diverged widely on both sides of the Taiwan strait, and that is how things stayed. However, by conducting scientific research collaboratively for more than ten years, China and Taiwan recently made a concerted effort to recount recent Chinese history. *Liang'an xinbian Zhongguo jindai shi* 兩岸新編中國近代史 [*A New History of Modern China Written by Scholars across the Strait*] was published by Social Sciences Academic Press and was edited by two authorities on modern history in partnership: the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Taipei's Academia Sinica. Intellectuals from both sides cooperated to compose the first section of this work, which gives prominence to scientific consensus between both

sides, while still allowing disagreements to be expressed. Although the section on the Nationalist Party's [Guomindang's] history is mainly handled by Taiwanese scholars, the section on the Chinese Communist Party's is principally written by scholars from the mainland. An attempt is made to reconcile the two sides' points of view, but divergences in opinions remain. Different versions supplement one another, and by piecing together a relatively complete historical picture, they end up converging even more. Therefore, in sections such as the one on the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), both sides ultimately agree on many aspects. Through this attempt at writing a history that allows a diversity of points of view to emerge and sets aside historical questions that have not so far reached a consensus, *A New History of Modern China Written by Scholars across the Strait* represents an attempt at unfolding a historiography that transcends both sides' perspectives and allows for the possibility of gaining a common perspective on Chinese history.

### 9 The Tomb Excavated in Nanchang Is Confirmed as Belonging to the Marquis of Haihun, and Excavations Show the Emergence of a "Public Archeology" Approach

A five-year archeological excavation of the Marquis of Haihun's tomb in Nanchang was completed in 2016. More than ten thousand relics were unearthed, including many utensils of exquisite craftsmanship and five thousand bamboo slips. It was also confirmed that the tomb was occupied by the Marquis of Haihun, Liu He, from the Western Han dynasty [202 BCE-220]. The value of the discoveries made during the excavation is unparalleled. Of special importance is the "Zhidao 知道" chapter of the Qi 齊 version of the *Lunyu 論語* [*Analects*], which had been lost for more than 1,800 years.

This archeological project differed from previous ones, whose developments had been undertaken exclusively by experts in related fields. In contrast, the unearthing of the Marquis of Haihun's tomb not only generated great enthusiasm in the academic world but also turned into a cultural event that spurred interest among all segments of society. Constant updates were provided by the media, and news conferences followed every significant development without delay. A high-quality public exhibition was also held. For the first time, this strategy of "simultaneously unearthing and displaying," which was carried out on a broader platform, made it easier for the public to remain informed about archeological results, and it fed popular enthusiasm over the cultural project. The archeological work surrounding the Marquis of Haihun's tomb has thus become an example of the emergence of "public archeology,"



proving that top-grade archeological resources can effectively attend to both specialized scientific development and social, cultural demands. The public approach as well as the ardor with which the investigations of the tomb were carried made it clear that archeological studies are becoming more interesting and more accessible to the public.

## 10 A New Tool or a New Paradigm? “Big Data” Enters the Scene

Following advances in the digitization of ancient classics, the creation of every kind of specialized database and the upgrading of other data-processing technologies, humanities scholars are already making use of newly developed concepts in information technologies, such as big data and cloud computing. In 2016, many scientific conferences focused on this subject, including the “Beijing University Digital Humanities Forum,” “Digital Humanities and Research in Qing Dynasty History,” and the “First Session of the New Historiography Youth Forum: Historical Material and Historiography in the Era of Big Databases”—demonstrating that academia is becoming more deeply involved not only in using but also in reflecting on the impact of big data on research in the humanities. Results that are already available indicate that big data’s methods of analysis are helpful in resolving historical problems that had previously been hard to process because of the long timespan they covered, and this has made it possible to correct a tendency toward “fragmentation” in historical research. The possibility of sharing data also pushed scholars to combine their efforts on a large scale and to extend their research beyond the boundaries of their own discipline. Of course, however, methods that rely only on data analysis can also have negative consequences, such as a lack of human concern, the diminution of individual contributions to discussions, or a disregard for innovative thought. Except for the fact that it provides new tools and new methods, the questions of whether big data will meet people’s expectations and of how it may bring fundamental transformations in humanities paradigms both remain to be answered.