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Jilin Xu, Edited and translated by David Ownby
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Rethinking China's Rise

China's rise to power is the signal event of the twenty-first century, and this volume offers a contemporary view of this nation in ascendancy from the inside. Eight recent essays by Xu Jilin, a popular historian and one of China's most prominent public intellectuals, critique China's rejection of universal values and the nation's embrace of Chinese particularism, the rise of the cult of the state, and the acceptance of the historicist ideas of Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. Xu's work is distinct both from better-known voices of dissent and also from the "New Left" perspectives, offering instead a liberal reaction to the complexity of China's rise. Yet this work is not a shrill denunciation of Xu's intellectual enemies, but rather a subtle and heartfelt call for China to accept its status as a great power and join the world as a force for good.

XU JILIN is Professor of History at East China Normal University in Shanghai, and is one of China's most prominent public intellectuals. His many articles and books have focused on various aspects of China's modern intellectual history.

DAVID OWNBY is Professor of History at the Université de Montréal. He worked on the history of societies in *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* (1996) and popular religion in *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (2008), before returning to an earlier interest in contemporary Chinese intellectual life.

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Rethinking China's Rise

A Liberal Critique

Xu Jilin

East China Normal University, Shanghai

Edited and Translated by David Ownby

Université de Montréal



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Preface

This volume is part of a joint research project entitled “Reading and Writing the Chinese Dream: Reinventing China’s Tradition(s), 1980 to the Present.” The project is funded as an Insight Grant by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the lead researchers are Timothy Cheek of the University of British Columbia, Joshua Fogel of York University, and myself. It was thanks to Timothy that I first met Xu Jilin, the author of the texts translated in this volume, at a conference in Vancouver, and the seed for the idea that would eventually become this book was planted on the return flight from Vancouver to Montréal, as I read through a volume of essays that Professor Xu had given me, becoming increasingly impressed and enchanted. It was my first extensive exposure to the richness and diversity of intellectual life in reform-era China, a richness that is little known outside of China except to a handful of specialists. Our project, and this volume, are dedicated to the conviction that what these thinkers have to say is important to the world.

My thanks go first to Xu Jilin, who has been invariably helpful and generous with his time. The Chinese intellectual world is full of divas who can’t be bothered to answer their emails; happily, Xu is not one of these. Thanks also to Timothy Cheek, who graciously allowed me to take over a project that he had hoped to accomplish one day. He also read through the complete manuscript, offering numerous suggestions for improvement. Joshua Fogel read several of the essays and made corrections and suggestions. Carl Déry read the manuscript and helpfully pointed out typos and other infelicities. Gloria Davies provided welcome feedback on the introduction.

I have given talks based on my work on Xu Jilin at Concordia University (Montréal), Meiji University (Tokyo), Monash University (Melbourne), and Columbia University (New York). My thanks to all those who offered comments and criticisms. The volume is better for them.

Thanks also to Lucy Rhymer and the staff at Cambridge University Press for their professionalism and efficiency.

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Editor and Translator's Introduction

David Ownby

China's rise is perhaps the signal event of the twenty-first century, and is the subject of this volume of essays. China's rise is, of course, *celebrated* in China. More than thirty years of unprecedented economic growth has lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty, reshaped the world economy, and allowed China to reassume its historic role as a great power. The relative decline of the United States, as evidenced by missteps such as the Iraq War, the financial crisis, and the election of Donald Trump, has produced a pride bordering on arrogance in many Chinese intellectuals, who are quick to offer China as a "model" of stability and "good governance" in a post-American world. The Shanghai historian Xu Jilin (b. 1957) is proud of China's rise as well. His adult life has coincided with China's economic transformation, and he has reaped the benefits in professional and personal terms. Yet despite his pride in China's accomplishments, Xu is also wary about certain less auspicious aspects of China's rise, and above all about the intellectual atmosphere that accompanies the cult of the state.

Xu Jilin is one of China's best-known liberal public intellectuals, but he is not a dissident. He is an establishment intellectual (or a "citizen intellectual," to use William Callahan's characterization¹), and his writings are examples of opinions and arguments that could be openly defended in China between roughly 2000 and 2015 – and still today, to some degree. A professor of history at East China Normal University in Shanghai, Xu has devoted his career to the study of modern China's intellectual history, and has published dozens of books and hundreds of articles on topics ranging from the May Fourth Enlightenment movement (1919) to contemporary intellectual politics.² Prior to recent restrictions on the

¹ See William A. Callahan, "China's Strategic Futures," *Asian Survey* 52.4 (July/August 2012): 617–42.

² Xu's major volumes include: *Xunqiu yiyi: Xiandaihua bianqian yu wenhua pipan* (In search of meaning: transformations of modernization and cultural criticism) (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 1997); *Ling yizhongde qimeng* (Another kind of enlightenment) (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1999); *Zhongguo zhishi fenzi shilun*

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Chinese blogosphere, Xu was also a very popular blogger, followed by some 650,000 readers,³ and he continues to post frequently via WeChat, if to a smaller audience. The key to his popularity lies in a combination of an elegant narrative style, a deep understanding of history and historiography in China and the West, and a gift for linking historical issues to contemporary concerns.

The present volume offers translations of eight essays penned by Xu Jilin over roughly the past ten years that deal with various aspects of the evolution of the intellectual arguments concerning “China’s rise” to great-power status. Xu criticizes statism and historicism as fanciful arguments whose wrong-headed origin he traces to a defense of Chinese particularism, the oft-repeated notion that “China is different” because of its long history and unique culture. He calls on China to embrace its great-power status with confidence, and to craft a new Chinese “universalism” that will contribute to a postmodern world of multiple universalisms. Xu selected the essays (although I omitted some and added others) with an eye toward the non-Chinese reader, meaning that he chose texts that address broad, general themes rather than narrow historical or historiographical concerns. I might add that the essays all

(Ten essays on Chinese intellectuals) (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2003); and *Zhongguo, he yi wenming* (What civilization for China) (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuzhu, 2015), among many others. As of November, 2017, many of his essays and interviews can be found at www.aisixiang.com/thinktank/xujilin.html. Previous studies of Xu’s work include Timothy Cheek, “Xu Jilin and the Thought Work of China’s Public Intellectuals,” *China Quarterly* 86 (2006): 401–20, and Xu is discussed in more general studies of Chinese intellectual life such as Timothy Cheek, *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), and Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition from Deng Xiaoping to Hu Jintao* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For existing English-language translations of Xu’s work, see: “The Fate of an Enlightenment: Twenty Years in the Chinese Intellectual Sphere,” trans. Geremie R. Barmé and Gloria Davies, in Edward Gu and Merle Goldman, eds., *Chinese Intellectuals between State and Market* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004): 183–203; “Reforming Peking University: A Window into Deliberative Democracy,” in Ethan J. Leib and He Baogang, eds., *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006): 245–58; “Social Darwinism in Modern China,” *Journal of Modern Chinese History* (2012): 182–97; “Contradictions within Enlightenment Ideas,” in Tian Yu Cao, Xueping Zhong, and Liao Kebin, eds., *Culture and Social Transformations in Reform-Era China* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012); “May Fourth: A Patriotic Movement of Cosmopolitanism,” *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies* 9.1 (2009): 29–62; and “Historical Memories of May Fourth Patriotism, but of What Kind?” *China Heritage Quarterly* 17 (March 2009), www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=017_mayfourthmemories.inc&issue=017.

³ Personal communication. Xu’s main blog is found at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/xujilin57>. Other blogs, more or less active, are: http://blog.163.com/xu_jilin/, <http://xujilin.blog.caixin.com/>, and <http://blog.ifeng.com/8359520.html>.

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address China's present and future, even if they are written from the perspective of a historian.

There are at least three reasons that these essays should be read by both China-watchers and those concerned with world affairs in general. First, Xu's essays offer a window into "what China thinks," a detailed portrait, crafted by a competent insider, of the world of ideas and politics in the age of Chinese President Xi Jinping (b. 1953). To Western eyes, the Chinese regime seems to be invariably "on message," and the Western media emphasizes the controlling nature of a government which, if no longer totalitarian, remains authoritarian. Xu Jilin's essays reveal the lively, complex debates that occur in spite of this authoritarianism, a sophisticated, cosmopolitan intellectual richness that the current regime has sought to control, but which continues to simmer beneath the surface.

Second, Xu's essays, while generally written in a tone of scholarly objectivity, also offer a liberal critique of and rejoinder to recent intellectual and political trends in China, a topic of considerable interest to those – in China and elsewhere – who continue to hope for the emergence of a democratic China. In many ways, Xu's liberalism is fairly typical, grounded in a belief in the rule of law and a constitutionalism that defines and limits state power. Yet liberals are on the defensive in today's China, as voices on the authoritarian left and the culturally conservative right currently find more favor with the regime. Consequently, Xu's criticisms go beyond slogans and table-pounding to engage writers and readers who do not necessarily share his views. Indeed, all of these essays are exercises in the use of history – both Chinese and global – to reach out to Chinese readers and remind them that China's rise is in some ways *not* unique, that the challenges, complexities, and dangers of China's current reality have appeared before, in China and elsewhere. His essays insist that *ideas matter*, that some are better than others, and that it is important to try to understand why we think the way we do.

The third reason to read Xu Jilin's essays is their extremely high quality, a quality that is in many ways the fruit of China's intellectual "globalization" over the past three decades. Many Chinese scholars have earned advanced degrees abroad; for those, like Xu, whose foreign-language skills are limited, a massive translation effort has made Western scholarship available in Chinese (as the footnotes to his essays richly illustrate). Traditional Chinese historical writing makes extensive use of citations, often to the point of obscuring narrative and argument. Scholars who wrote during the Maoist period (1949–76) strayed from the Party line at their peril, which meant that most texts were highly predictable. Xu, along with other writers of his generation, has been largely free to craft his own style, which emphasizes clarity of narrative and argument. Xu

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writes to be read, and I have attempted to convey that quality in my translations. To my mind, many of these essays are the Chinese equivalent of the sort of essays we might find in the *New York Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, or similar publications, which seek to address the educated public at large. Indeed, most of the essays in this volume are more polemical, or perhaps educational, than scholarly.

Chinese Intellectuals in the Post-Mao Era

Xu Jilin's scholarship and style, like that of his fellow public intellectuals, is largely a product of developments in China since the 1990s.⁴ The intellectual openness and independence that marks Xu's writings clearly would not have been possible under the Maoist regime, where all publications followed some iteration of the Party line, and intellectual debates occurred within Party forums. Things began to change after Mao's death in 1976, and accelerated in the 1980s, but the most important writings from the first post-Mao decade reflect either loyalist criticisms of the Communist Party grounded in a rereading of Marx – in the writings of Wang Ruoshui (1926–2002), Liu Binyan (1925–2005), and perhaps even Wei Jingsheng (b. 1950) – or a giddy, optimistic embrace of possible alternatives to the communist system, either in the guise of Western liberalism and science (embodied in translation and publishing projects such as *Toward the Future and China and the World* and perhaps in the television documentary, *River Elegy*) or in the guise of Chinese traditional culture (revived in another project entitled *The Academy of Chinese Culture*).⁵ The suppression of the student demonstrations in 1989 and the conservative backlash that followed put an end to both the criticism and the giddiness.

The 1990s were less innocent and more complicated. The fall of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, followed by the collapse of the Soviet empire, came as a shock to many Chinese. Even liberals who might have been cheered by the failure of communism were sobered by the mixed results of the economic shock therapies prescribed by Western advisors for the post-communist era. Scholars often note that Chinese possess a particular fear of chaos (*luan*); in the 1990s, “chaos”

⁴ See Xu's own assessment of the evolution of China's post-Mao intellectual scene, in “The Fate of an Enlightenment.”

⁵ For an insider's view of intellectual activities in the 1980s, see Chen Fong-Ching and Jin Guantao, *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy: The Chinese Popular Culture Movement and Political Transformation, 1979–1989* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1997); see also Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

took on highly specific meanings as Russia became an oligarchic kleptocracy and much of Eastern Europe fell into poverty and war. General confidence in the West as a model or as a partner also declined in China during this period, adding to the generally bleak atmosphere. The American triumphalism that accompanied the Western “victory,” aptly symbolized by Francis Fukuyama’s writings on “The End of History,” rubbed many Chinese (among others) the wrong way. Some suspected that the Tian’anmen demonstrations had been the result of American machinations, which fed the notion that the United States was working against China’s development through international institutions associated with the Washington consensus. All of this nourished the rise of a paranoid, distrustful nationalism in China, and brought many Chinese intellectuals closer to the state.

At the same time, Deng Xiaoping’s success in refocusing China’s energy on economic reform, symbolized by his Southern Tour in December of 1992, eventually had another impact on Chinese intellectual life. Deng’s call to embrace markets, openness, and globalization meant that China needed its intellectuals to help China compete with the outside world, and this commitment translated into huge investments in university education and calls for Chinese universities to be competitive with other universities elsewhere in the world. The transformation, at least in the cases of China’s best schools, has been nothing short of astounding, as anyone who spent time in China’s universities prior to this transformation can testify. China’s best universities, like those of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, are now thoroughly professionalized and largely integrated into global trends in knowledge production.⁶ As a result, top-tier Chinese intellectuals often spend large amounts of time in the West, and have mastered Western methodologies in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in more technical disciplines.

Changes in China’s media landscape were equally important as investments in education. Although Party control and censorship remain important obstacles to the free exchange of ideas, the emergence of the Internet and social networks since the 1990s, the proliferation of magazines, journals, and publishing houses, and the embrace of a consumerist popular culture have created a brave new world.⁷ For

⁶ See John W. Morgan and Bin Wu, eds., *Higher Education Reform in China* (London: Routledge, 2001); Rui Yang and Anthony Welch, “A World-Class University in China? The Case of Tsinghua,” *Higher Education* 63.5 (May 2012): 645–66.

⁷ See Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics and “Thought Work” in Reformed China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Johan Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Chen Pingyuan, “Destiny and Options of Contemporary

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intellectuals, there are now many outlets that will pay for their copy – provided that it will sell. For powerful ideas that do not find their place in consumerist popular culture, there is the Internet, whose presence in China is huge and – generally – less subject to the pervasive controls that continue to limit what can be published in China. As mentioned above, authorities have recently reshaped the structure of China's social networks so as to reduce their impact, for example by moving intellectuals away from wide-open blogs and toward smaller, group-driven formats like WeChat, which have less impact and are easier to control. Nonetheless, intellectuals eagerly exploit available platforms to exchange ideas and build followings.

Not all of these changes have been positive. Among other things, they have produced a fragmentation of China's intellectual world. Intellectuals on top-flight college campuses no longer have the leisure to reflect at length and in print on existential questions of moral responsibility; publish or perish is the new normal, and Chinese universities can be frighteningly competitive environments. In Timothy Cheek's apt characterization, China's intellectuals are no longer priests, but have become professionals.⁸ There is of course safety and competence in professionalization; there may not be relevance, as American humanities professors can attest. The rise of a popular consumerist mass culture is threatening in other ways. To the extent that China follows a North American populist path toward *American Idol*, Oprah, and reality shows, elitist high culture – the foundation of the moral stance of the Confucian scholar-official, which remains important to Xu Jilin and to other contemporary Chinese intellectuals – risks being drowned out by the noise and the spectacle. Han Han, the author, race-car driver and singer who represented young China's first Internet generation, often sparred with the leading lights of the Chinese Academy on his blog, until recently a favorite among Chinese young people.⁹ I suspect that Han Han's successors – like the current mass media star Papi Jiang¹⁰ – will not bother, because they don't care about the academy. To the extent that contemporary Chinese intellectuals, who often see themselves as the conscience of the nation,

Chinese Scholars of the Humanities," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 29.2 (Winter 1997–98): 5–28.

⁸ Timothy Cheek, "From Priests to Professionals: Intellectuals and the State under the CCP," in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Popular Protest and Political Culture in China: Learning from 1989* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992): 124–45.

⁹ See, for example, Han Han, *Blogs de Chine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012): 169–73.

¹⁰ www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/arts/international/chinas-viral-idol-papi-jiang-a-girl-next-door-with-attitude.html?_r=0.

lose out to consumerist-driven mass media, an important counterweight to state discourse is weakened and the voice of populism strengthened.

This “secularization” of China’s culture in the post-Mao era, as well as the omnipresence and vulgarity of popular culture, are themes that Xu Jilin addresses in his essays. Here, the important point is to note the positive conditions that came together in the 1990s and 2000s to permit Xu – and other Chinese public intellectuals – to produce scholarship and commentary of a quality and richness not seen in China since the Republican Period (1911–49). These positive conditions – massive investments in China’s best universities, international exchanges resulting in the globalization of Chinese research agendas, the transformation of China’s media landscape, and relative political liberalization – have produced a series of exchanges and debates within the Chinese intellectual world concerning China’s historical identity and her place in the world that are worthy of the world’s attention.

How to Read Xu Jilin

That said, it is not easy for the Western China-watcher to get a handle on these exchanges and debates. We have tended to analyze the Chinese intellectual landscape by reducing it to three main groups: the Liberals, the New Left, and the New Confucians.¹¹ These divisions arose largely in the 1990s, after the shock of the Tian’anmen massacres had put an end to the heady liberal optimism of the 1980s and intellectuals debated the way forward, in exchanges that came to be increasingly acrimonious. Such labels are not without utility, and express some baseline positions held by members of the groups. At the same time, not all intellectuals self-identify as members of one of the groups, and the labels were in part created by critics of the “left” or of “liberalism” in attempts to tarnish their ideas via association with China’s Maoist past or Western neoliberalism. The groups are not always particularly self-conscious nor organized, and what little they once possessed in the way of institutional identity (websites, journals, publishing houses) has been the target of suppression under Xi Jinping.¹² In addition, individual intellectuals are free to move in and out of groups, to change their position within groups, to be “liberal” on some issues and “Confucian” on others, or

¹¹ See Cheek, *The Intellectual in Modern China*, pp. 289–309; He Li, *Political Thought and China’s Transformation: Ideas Shaping Reform in Post-Mao China* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). He Li also discusses neo-authoritarians and democratic socialists.

¹² A prominent example is the closing of the liberal magazine *Yanhuang chunqiu*. See www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/world/asia/china-yanhuang-chunqiu.html.

to create new groups at the margins of the three main ones. In sum, the familiar division of Chinese intellectuals into Liberals, New Left, and New Confucians is useful as a handy first take on a complex situation, but does not do justice to reality.

For citizen intellectuals seeking to make a difference in China – or elsewhere, for that matter – life consists largely of their reactions to public events and trends that engage media attention. Debates and positions are crafted against the backdrop of one-time events like the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999 or longer trends such as China's rise or the perceived decline of the United States, and are deeply engaged with state discourse on such events and trends. A member of the Liberals, or the New Left, or the New Confucians, may well seek allies among like-minded thinkers in trying to make his case and move state or intellectual or public opinion through the publication of a book, an article, or a blog post, but the ultimate goal remains to have an impact in a context where the Party-State is the major political actor (and also controls many of the resources that make intellectual life possible). Thus an accurate depiction of the life of public intellectuals in China would necessarily be historical, depicting a complex and interlocking series of debates in which the Party-State is a major actor.¹³ While it is tempting to spend our time sorting intellectuals into their proper groups, or “mapping” the topography of intellectual life in China, to my mind the sociology of the exchanges between and among intellectuals and groups of intellectuals is a product of the larger history of intellectuals attempting to sway the Party-State, and of the Party-State regulating intellectual life. If we, as Western scholars, tend to reproduce the classifications used by Chinese intellectuals, it is largely because few of us have the time or the linguistic skills to read all of the books, newspaper and magazine articles, blog posts and WeChat “discover moments” necessary to keep abreast of what is happening.

Against that broader backdrop, I would suggest that there are several ways to read Xu Jilin.

One is as a Chinese intellectual engaged in research and reflection on the meaning of Chinese identity in the face of Western power, or perhaps simply in the face of modernity. In many ways, the questions raised by contemporary Chinese intellectuals like Xu are similar to those asked

¹³ He Li, *Political Thought and China's Transformation* treats some of these debates – on democracy, economic reform, and regime legitimacy. Ma Licheng, a well-respected journalist in China, also attempts to historicize his discussion of the leading intellectual groups in his *Leading Schools of Thought in Contemporary China* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2016) (original Chinese-language edition 2013).

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How to Read Xu Jilin

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since China's fateful encounter with Western imperialism in the nineteenth century. What happened to us? Where did our civilization and our power go? What do we have to do to catch up? What are the techniques of pursuing wealth and power, and what will it cost us as a civilization? What should we do about/with our tradition(s)? Although Xu is not an intellectual whose primary role or goal is to explain the West to China or to defend China against the West, readers of this volume will discover that he spends a great deal of time talking about Western history and what that history means to China's self-understanding and future. Of course, as a professionally trained historian in the early twenty-first century, his outlook is more sophisticated than that of some of his intellectual predecessors, but Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi would have little difficulty understanding Xu's arguments, because Xu is in an ongoing dialogue with them, as well as with his colleagues and peers in contemporary China.

At the same time, and paradoxically, we can also read Xu Jilin as a participant in contemporary debates on the meaning of liberalism, not only in China or East Asia, but in the world at large. I will not belabor this point for want of detailed knowledge about the state of contemporary political debate, nor am I sure to what extent Xu has theoretical ambitions at this level. But the evidence of Xu's engagement with liberal authors is clear throughout this volume. One text applies Charles Taylor's reading of the "great disembedding" in European history to China, in a way that probes both similarities and differences in the experiences. Elsewhere he recasts many of the classical concerns of liberalism to reintegrate Confucianism and other aspects of Chinese tradition with an eye toward creating a "civil religion" along the American model but with Chinese content, the hope being that Confucian values can fulfill the same function in China as Judeo-Christian values have done in the United States, even as both societies have secularized. Xu is hardly unique on this front among Chinese liberals or Chinese intellectuals in general; the Chinese New Left, in particular, grounds many of its arguments in texts from the postmodern or post-Marxist West – although their goal is often to use those arguments to defend China's particularity. Xu is perhaps innovative in imagining that China can evolve a liberalism that would make a contribution to world civilization. This is not "liberalism with Chinese characteristics," which insists defensively on China's particularism, but rather a postmodern liberalism of which China could readily be a part.

A third, related, way to read Xu Jilin is as part of a Chinese rejoinder to (or participation in) Western critical inquiry. This close reading of what is often called the "Sinophone master narrative" has been brilliantly realized by Gloria Davies in works like *Worrying about China*, where Xu's

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writings appear frequently as objects of her analysis.¹⁴ Here, the project is to understand the assumptions shared by Chinese intellectuals concerning the centrality of China, and China's salvation, to their work, as well as the authors' continuing (Confucian) commitment to the idea that proper thought is important and a part of self-cultivation as well as state service. One of Davies's important points is her discovery that, to the extent that contemporary Chinese intellectuals build their arguments on postmodern currents in the West, the Chinese *habitus* is in some ways wrong-headed, since Western postmodernists emphasize the difficulties of knowing the world in an effort to problematize and move beyond modernity, while Chinese intellectuals trust in the knowability of the world in the hopes of advancing China's interests. Xu's texts in this volume are of course grist for this mill, although my guess is that Xu thinks he has gone beyond the contradiction Davies notes in her study.

Since the present volume is a work of translation rather than analysis, I have not had to select or defend a particular strategy for reading Xu Jilin. I read him first as an engaged and engaging Chinese public intellectual seeking to explain the potentials and pitfalls associated with China's rise, a topic of some importance to all of humanity. Xu's essays also serve as an excellent example of the various voices assumed by Chinese citizen intellectuals as they attempt to influence the state, their peers, and the public at large. Only one of these texts (Chapter 7) is deeply academic and aimed chiefly at Xu's colleagues in history departments throughout China and the Sinophone world. Others (particularly Chapters 2 and 3) are highly polemical texts that draw on Xu's academic background but which seek to sway the opinion of public intellectuals like him. Yet others (Chapters 1, 4, 5, and 6) are written for the broader public, and some of these look more like op-eds than "serious" writing. One piece (Chapter 8) is a eulogy, and is thus emotional and expressive in ways not seen in other texts in this volume. I know of no means to measure Xu's impact in any scientific way. But these texts tell us something about the various strategies Xu employs to try to exert influence.

I should note at this point that in focusing on Xu and his writings, I run the risk of presenting him as more unique than he actually is. His voice is, of course, unique in the way that all voices are unique, but all of the essays translated here, and all of the themes addressed in those essays, are parts of debates and exchanges involving large numbers of Chinese authors. In other words, Xu is not the only author to compare China to Germany and Japan, to debate the value of a return to *tianxia*,

¹⁴ Gloria Davies, *Worrying about China: The Language of Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

to discuss the comparative utility of universal values and cultural consciousness. A methodology that focuses on the debates rather than on individual authors has the virtue of elucidating the larger context, at the risk of obscuring the role of individual writers. My choice has been to explore the richness of one voice as a way of sharing with readers the wealth of contemporary China's intellectual world.

China's Rise and Xu Jilin's Response

The effects of China's rise on China's intellectual sphere have been many, and can be read as different efforts to provide contents for Xi Jinping's embrace of the "China Dream" as a major propaganda point, although in many cases their efforts preceded the launch of Xi's "China Dream" campaign.¹⁵ Energetic content providers include: various proponents of the China model or the Beijing consensus; cultural conservatives, including, but not limited to, the New Confucians; and authors from the New Left who have embraced statism as a means to achieving "good governance" while avoiding the perils and pitfalls of electoral democracy as practiced in the West; nationalists and ultranationalists of a variety of stripes, some of whom may also belong to other intellectual groups. For those who follow China from afar, and only through mainstream media, Xu Jilin's portrait of China's intellectual world will be eye-opening, and the same may be true for China specialists who do not follow contemporary intellectual trends closely. When many in the West think about Chinese intellectuals, they quite naturally think about dissidents such as Ai Weiwei and Liu Xiaobo. Xu Jilin's discussion of Chinese intellectual life – which of course cannot include discussion of Chinese dissidents for reasons of censorship – illustrates how simplistic that Western focus is, and plunges us into a complex world of debates in which genuine intellectual opposition to Western democracy currently seems to have the upper hand. Of course, some of this "genuine intellectual opposition" is also politically motivated, but as Donald Trump's victory – fueled by duplicity and demagoguery – further complicates the political future of the world's leading democracy, it behooves us to read Chinese critics of democracy more carefully. They may still be wrong from a Western liberal perspective, but at the same time convincing to those whose beliefs in democratic politics are wavering.

¹⁵ These discourses are deftly analyzed in Shaun Breslin, "The 'China Model and the Global Crisis': From Friedrich List to a Chinese Mode of Governance?" *International Affairs* 87.6 (2011): 1323–43.

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For example, one figure consistently associated with the China model is Zhang Weiwei, a professor of international politics at Fudan University in Shanghai.¹⁶ Zhang's original strength was his command of English; he was one of Deng Xiaoping's interpreters when Deng visited the United States in the 1980s and for the last few years, Zhang has traveled the world, presenting the China model to anyone who will listen – and there are many who listen.

Zhang's arguments begin with the basic data concerning the growth of China's economy since the 1980s, to which he adds personal impressions, comparing, for example the municipalities of Shanghai and New York, arguing that New York has been outclassed.¹⁷ Anyone who has flown into the JFK and Pudong airports over the past few years would be hard put to disagree with Zhang, at least on a superficial level, and Zhang marshals further statistics on Shanghai's infrastructural advantages, the fruits of thirty years of intensive rebuilding, which, again, are not unconvincing. He extends his arguments beyond Shanghai and New York, noting that nowhere in the many cities and countries he has visited over the past decade or two has he found anything that compares to China. Again, if we constrain our conversation to the level of material progress, Zhang is hardly exaggerating.

On this basis, Zhang argues that China is a, or perhaps *the* world super-power (particularly if we measure such things according to purchasing power parity rather than GDP, as Zhang insists at some length¹⁸), and that the China model is available to inspire the rest of the world. China's exceptional characteristics, for Zhang, include: China's "super-large population, super-vast territory, super-long traditions, and super-rich culture," as well as her "unique language, politics, society and economics."¹⁹ Of course, China possessed all of these in the nineteenth century as well, and they did not prevent her downfall.

Zhang's discussions of China's developmental model are perhaps more compelling. The features of this model include: "practice-based

¹⁶ See Zhang's "trilogy": *Zhongguo zhenhan: Yige "wenmingxing guojia" de jueqi* (The China shock: The rise of a "civilizational state") (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2011); *Zhongguo chudong: Baiguo shiyexia de guan cha yu sikao* (The China impact: Observations and reflections after visiting one hundred countries) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2012); and *Zhongguo chaoyue: Yige "wenmingxing" guojia de guangrong yu mengxiang* (China's transcendence: The glory and dream of a "civilizational state") (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2014). The first volume is available in English translation as *China Wave: The Rise of a Civilizational State* (Hackensack, NJ: World Century Publishing, 2012).

¹⁷ Zhang, *The China Wave*, ch. 1.1 (Kindle edition).

¹⁸ Ibid., 1.3, 1.4 (Kindle edition).

¹⁹ Ibid., 3.2 (Kindle edition).

reasoning, a strong state, prioritizing stability, the primacy of the people's livelihood, gradual reform, correct priorities and sequence, a mixed economy, and opening to the outside world.”²⁰ However, as we read Zhang more carefully, we note that most of these features are simply mirror images of other models that Zhang seeks to denigrate. “Practice-based reasoning” is opposed to the highly theoretical economic models and theories, often associated with the Chicago School of Economics, which sought to grant overweening power to the market and dismiss the need for government regulation. “A strong state” is opposed to Reaganite or Thatcherite arguments that “the government is the problem.” Zhang insists that government is a “necessary good” and not a “necessary evil.” “Gradual reform” is in contrast to the “shock therapy” employed in the transition from a planned socialist economy to a market economy in the former USSR and much of Eastern Europe. Because of these stances, Zhang's debates with Western intellectuals often devolve into something resembling the thrust and parry of a typical internet comments section, where many participants simply talk past one another.²¹ And Zhang Weiwei is but the tip of the iceberg. The China model or Beijing consensus has become a major theme in Chinese intellectual life, discussed by more respected, mainstream scholars like the economist Yao Yang and the political scientist Pan Wei, together with many others on the left and the right who embrace some version of Chinese exceptionalism.

New Confucians have a slightly different, if overlapping view of Chinese exceptionalism, and argue that China must return to its Confucian roots in order to create a lasting political legitimacy and to restore a sense of morality to a China adrift in cynicism and consumerism. Different New Confucian authors offer different visions. Jiang Qing, probably the best known of the group, suggests that a new Confucian order must necessarily be based on a combination of transcendent moral vision (embodied in the somewhat mythical “Three Dynasties” of China's pre-imperial history), the cultural and historical experiences of a people, and the expression of popular will.²² Jiang thus addresses the concerns of many – in China and elsewhere – regarding the utilitarian nature of current democratic practices and their tendency to represent either well-organized

²⁰ Ibid., 4.2 (Kindle edition).

²¹ See, for example, Francis Fukuyama and Zhang Weiwei, “The China Model: A Dialogue between Francis Fukuyama and Zhang Weiwei,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* (Fall 2011): 40–67.

²² See Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape its Political Future*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Ruiping Fan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

special interests or the easily manipulated common denominator. And his calls for greater respect of morality and history cannot be rejected out of hand, again in light of the tenor of the 2016 presidential campaign in the United States and other recent elections in the democratic West. Yet Jiang's concrete, institutional proposals seem fanciful. He imagines a tri-cameral legislature with one house made up of "distinguished Confucians," another comprised of descendants from the Confucian family line, and a third chosen by popular election.

Another prominent New Confucian, Kang Xiaoguang, has proposed the adoption of Confucianism as China's national religion as a means of reconnecting China with its traditions, discarded and ignored since the early twentieth century. But Kang offers a wider range of possibilities than Jiang: a free press, which will keep the people informed and the politicians on their guard; an industrial corporatism that will represent the interests of the working class; and an "administrative absorption of politics" in which a technocratic meritocracy will deal with social and economic problems outside of the realm of politics.²³

Xu Jilin is dismissive of Zhang Weiwei because he finds his arguments unpersuasive, and he lumps the China model proponents with "historicist" trends: nativist reactions to cosmopolitan incursions that date back to Germany's rejoinder to the imposition, by Napoleon's armies, of "universal" French civilization. Against French (and English) universal claims, German intellectuals crafted a counter-argument grounded in culture and nation, arguing that the universal does not exist, only the historical, which is embodied in the nation-state. Similar arguments have been repeated many times since – in Germany, Japan, India, Turkey, China, and elsewhere – when indigenous cultures have been threatened by the *mission civilisatrice* of cosmopolitan internationalism. As will be illustrated below, Xu believes that historicism is a false solution to a false problem. Xu is equally dismissive of the New Confucians, because he finds their arguments vulgar; as a historian who does his homework, Xu is scornful of the lack of grounding of many so-called New Confucians in the genuine texts and ritual practices of Confucianism. Of course, all traditions are "reinvented," but to Xu, many of the claims of the New Confucians are patently political and utilitarian, designed to catch the eyes and ears of China's leaders by offering a defense for continued authoritarianism: China's tradition. As we will see below, Xu makes his own attempts to reappropriate Confucianism and Chinese tradition within a refashioned liberalism.

²³ See David Ownby, "Kang Xiaoguang: Social Science, Civil Society, and Confucian Religion," *China Perspectives* 4 (2009): 102–11.

Most of Xu Jilin's concern is directed at the New Left, leading figures of which have also gravitated toward positions that endorse the uniqueness of the Chinese experience and hence shore up state power. As their name suggests, the New Left was originally grounded in concern for the people – China's working class and China's peasants. Although proud of China's economic and material development, they remained wary of China's integration into the forces of global capitalism, and of the new alliances struck between members of the Party-State and China's new entrepreneurial elite. If the "New Left" was "new," it was because its leading intellectual lights had studied in the West and developed an interest in postmodern approaches to critical theory, fusing a nostalgia for some aspects of Maoism with a creative and wide-ranging embrace of socialist possibilities drawn from a wide variety of sources.

In Xu Jilin's telling, however, in the wake of China's rise, much of the New Left has embraced statism, and in so doing abandoned the people. For example, although Wang Hui, preeminent member of China's New Left and China's best-known intellectual, once presented himself as a critical intellectual and viewed state power with great caution, he has more recently argued that the CCP has been "nationalized" over the course of the history of the PRC, so that the Party now fully represents the interests of the people.²⁴ In other words, the Party-State has somehow transcended the oligopolistic alliances linking it to – frequently corrupt – business practices so that it now suffers no conflict of interest. There is of course no way to prove such an argument; Wang's assertion is a statement of faith, or a bid for Xi Jinping's ear. Similarly, Wang Shaoguang, another important figure on the New Left, now argues that genuine democracy is not electoral democracy, which is more "electoral" than "democratic" because of the manipulations of candidates and interest groups, but rather a "responsive democracy": "A government's responsiveness to the people, meaning government policies that to a high degree reflect popular needs, demands, and preferences, this kind of democracy is the closest to the true meaning of democracy."²⁵ If China does not yet fully embody this kind of democracy, it is closer than other models, which continue to pursue the chimera of one person,

²⁴ Some of Wang Hui's work is available in English translation: Wang Hui, *China's New World Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Wang Hui, *The End of Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2009); Wang Hui, *The Politics of Imagining Asia*, ed. Theodore Hutters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); in addition to a number of articles.

²⁵ Wang Shaoguang, *Minzhu silun* (Four theses on democracy) (Beijing: Shenghuo, Dushu, Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian, 2008), p. 78.

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one vote.²⁶ Of course, when one abandons democracy for “good governance,” external controls over whether a government is indeed “responsible” largely disappear. Developing similar themes, another prominent New Left figure, Gan Yang, argues that China must find a way to “integrate the three traditions”: the Confucian tradition, the Mao Zedong tradition, and the Deng Xiaoping tradition. Democracy based on individual freedom and constitutional rule do not figure in any important way in those traditions; “Chineseness” and Chinese traditions are more important than democracy in Gan’s vision of China’s future – although a younger Gan frequently insisted on the importance of mass democracy, expressed through elections.²⁷

Particularly worrisome to Xu is the fact that some of China’s younger public intellectuals continue to construct statist arguments on the basis of their Western education. The ideas of Carl Schmidt (“Hitler’s crown jurist”) and Leo Strauss figure prominently in the writings of intellectuals such as Jiang Shigong, who uses such sources to argue, for example, that the Chinese Communist Party possesses an “unwritten constitution” whose writ goes beyond the formal written document.²⁸ Other intellectuals have, in Xu’s words, “used the newly imported postcolonial theories of Edward Said to re-examine Chinese Enlightenment discourse since the May Fourth, and pronounced them to be a ‘Western orientalism’ colonized in China. They proclaimed that modernity in China was over, and that it should be replaced with a ‘Chineseness’ informed by native consciousness.” In Xu’s biting summary:

These scholars are not insiders sucking on the teat of Marxism-Leninism, not fundamentalists whose thought is stale, but most are rather modern intellectuals who have received a systematic education in the West ... These historicist intellectuals work at first-tier universities inside and outside of China like Beijing University, Qinghua University, Hong Kong University, etc., and hold themselves to be independent intellectuals, although they maintain an ambiguous relationship with the state, sometimes close and sometimes distant. What is propping up their proposals is not dogmatic Marxism-Leninism but instead faddish Western theories.²⁹

²⁶ Wang Shaoguang has published widely in English and Chinese. His most recent book is *Zhongguo: Zheng-dao* (China: The way of politics) (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016).

²⁷ See Gan Yang, *Tongsantong* (Unifying the three traditions) (Beijing: Shenghuo, Dushu, Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian, 2007).

²⁸ On Schmitt and Strauss, see Kai Marchal and Carl K. Y. Shaw, eds., *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the Chinese-Speaking World: Reorienting the Political* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

²⁹ Xu Jilin, “The Specter of Leviathan: A Critique of Chinese Statism since 2000,” translated below, Chapter 2.

The result of all of this has been to produce a great “China chorus,” as Xu calls it, a series of intellectual claims concerning China’s unique path to wealth and power, claims that elevate the state to new and frightening heights.

Xu Jilin sets out to refute these arguments, but the great virtue of his essays is less to point out the individual inconsistencies in the arguments of his intellectual opponents in polemical terms, and more to place all of these arguments in a much broader historical and cultural context. Instead of accusing his opponents of intellectual inconsistency or sucking up to state power, Xu analyzes their positions in terms of themes such as statism and historicism, in essays such as “The Specter of Leviathan: A Critique of Chinese Statism since 2000,” and “Universal Civilization, or Chinese Values? A Critique of Historicist Thought since 2000.”

As mentioned above, historicism is the notion that there are no universal values, that everything is determined by history and all history is ultimately national. Those who insist on China’s unique cultural heritage usually base their arguments on a kind of historicism, a claim to identity that seeks to brand universalistic and abstract discussions of human rights or political accountability as “outside interference in China’s sovereign affairs.” Sovereignty and statism are clearly linked, and in many ways are the product of historicism. Historicism’s linkage of culture with nation – again, a product of the German nationalism emerging from the Napoleonic invasion – defines people first as members of a nation and second as individuals. The individual finds meaning not in himself but in the state, and the state has every reason to hold the individual to that tenet. And if statist symbols, rituals, and propaganda are insufficient to retain individual loyalty, the state must identify enemies, either within the state or outside, so as to reinforce citizen identity to the state and state projects. In this process, all values other than those of state sovereignty and state power are eclipsed. Without arguing directly that China is on a path toward fascism, Xu suggests that the consequences for China of the rise of these discourses go far beyond unpleasant arguments among public intellectuals.

At the same time, Xu suggests that all is not lost. In essays such as “Two Kinds of Enlightenment: Civilizational Consciousness or Cultural Consciousness,” and “What Kind of Civilization? China at a Crossroads,” he traces the histories of what he calls “civilizational consciousness” and “cultural consciousness” in China over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in effect comparing China’s reaction to the arrival of the West with Germany’s reaction to the French invasion in the early nineteenth century. Here he finds an alternance between openness and a return to nativism, a cycle fueled by China’s internal and

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external history. In the early twentieth century, Liang Qichao, among others, advocated openness to Western values, in opposition to previous reformers who were open only to wealth and power. After World War I, however, Liang, and others, sickened by the violence of the war, returned to a posture of protecting China's "national soul" against the excesses of Western materialism and individualism. At the same time, a younger generation of intellectuals, represented by the likes of Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi, once again displayed a "civilizational consciousness" in Chen's openness to French civilization and Hu's fondness for American pragmatism. Chen and Hu sparred with Du Yaquan and others who argued that civilizational consciousness compromised China's cultural agency. Ultimately, this complex and multi-faceted debate was subsumed by the anti-Japanese war, and the thirst for enlightenment by the necessity of national salvation. Mao's sinicization of Marxism-Leninism was, in Xu's terms, the triumph of cultural consciousness over civilizational consciousness.

The cycle began again in the post-Mao era, the 1980s being marked by an openness to the outside, followed by a nativist reaction since the 1990s, a reaction which has intensified with China's more recent rise. Xu belabors this point for two reasons. First, he wants to illustrate that the theme has a history, which presumably is not over. Thus the fact that statist and historicist are in the ascendant today does not necessarily mean that they will be so in ten years. External and internal events impact such attitudes, and China has embraced globalization. Second, Xu belabors the point because he wants to question the premise of the opposition between civilizational consciousness and cultural consciousness. For Xu, a proud native of Shanghai, the idea that "China" and "the West" can be separated from one another in such a manner as to allow polemical arguments about universal civilization and native culture makes little sense. China cannot "return to its roots" in any meaningful sense because of the history of modernity. The West, in the form of wealth and power, science, technology, ideas, and political philosophies, has been part and parcel of China for a century and a half, and if China perhaps approached economic autarchy during the era of high Maoism, exchanges with the West – and with the rest of the world as well – have only accelerated in the reform period. That Western-trained Chinese public intellectuals use the "foreign" ideas of Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss to build historicist paeans to China's uniqueness is, on the face of it, absurd.

Yet Xu Jilin's argument is not that China's intellectuals should simply accept the fact of global modernity/universal civilization and move on. Not for him the total Westernization of Hu Shi. In fact, his argument

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is considerably more subtle, and is aimed at the New Confucians and other cultural conservatives as well as the New Left, now in pursuit of state favor. His argument, developed in essays like “The New *Tianxia*: Rebuilding China's Internal and External Order,” is first that there are different configurations of universal civilization, different ways of mixing commitments to human rights and liberty, economic growth and military power, Faustian striving with respect for nature. As a country with a long history based on one of humanity's original, axial civilizations, China – as a great power – has the responsibility to make its own claim to universal civilization, to defend, before other members of the global community, China's particular configuration of universal civilization. This is where Xu's argument differs from official Chinese White Papers on, for example, China's view of human rights. Xu is not arguing for cultural relativism, but for cultural relevance. If China wants to claim great-power status – and clearly Xu thinks China has that right – then she must consciously embrace universal civilization and make her own signal contribution. In other words, it does not work to say “I am a great power, don't meddle in my sovereign affairs on issues of human rights.” China must not only explain her vision of universal civilization, she must convince the rest of the world, with arguments, not bluster.

To some extent, Xu Jilin is calling the bluff of the ultranationalists and the statist, illustrating the logical inconsistency in their posture. But he goes further, in a discursive move that illustrates a new wrinkle in his liberalism, a wrinkle aimed at reappropriating parts of China's past for the liberal cause in innovative ways. In his essay on the “new *tianxia*,” Xu begins by exploring the effects of China's current culturalist-historicist-statist stance on foreign policy and minority policy issues, noting that China's rise has made China's neighbors very nervous, and that things have not gone smoothly in Tibet and Xinjiang for the past few decades either. On the basis of that observation, Xu goes on to discuss China's premodern universalism, i.e., the notion that China was the center of the known world, in the same context of foreign policy and minority relations. His goal is double. First, in an intellectual moment when Chinese thinkers are called upon to reappropriate Chinese traditions for nationalist and statist ends, Xu does the same thing but for different reasons and with a different outcome. Second, Xu hopes to demonstrate, through this reappropriation, exactly how China's uniqueness can contribute to universal civilization.

In a nutshell, Xu's argument is that China's premodern universalism, despite a certain arrogance and despite language distinguishing “Chinese” from “barbarians,” was in fact an open, welcoming universalism. Barbarians could become Chinese and Chinese could become

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barbarians, which happened constantly in frontier regions. The categories were not racial, but instead cultural. The same logic applied to people from other countries, a logic incorporated into the well-known tribute system. Practical policies, particularly during the Qing period, built on these conceptions to construct a (sometimes) smoothly functioning system in which the Qing rulers adopted different standards for ruling peoples of different cultures, or for dealing with peripheral countries who wished to be part of the Chinese cultural world.

Xu's argument is that some of these practices – or at least the spirit behind these practices – should be revived. Chinese current minority policies, which consist of forced assimilation despite a formal discourse of mutual respect, reflect the brittle character of China's statist regime and the embrace, by that regime, of the goals of national wealth and power. A return to indirect rule through local control would surely work better, Xu suggests. As for relations with China's neighbors, an effort to modernize China's traditional sense of brotherhood with the sinicized world would surely work better than asserting ownership of vast swatches of the South China Sea, and building islands to police these waters.

I do not know if Xu intends these suggestions to be taken seriously or if he is simply being provocative. But what he calls China's "new *tianxia*" is a demonstration of the kind of contribution he would like to see China make to universal civilization, a contribution clearly reflective of China's unique history. A Chinese liberal thus reappropriates China's past for the well-being of humanity's future.

Xu's engagement with Chinese tradition does not stop with minority relations and foreign policy. To this point I have been dealing chiefly with Xu's responses to members of the New Left, but he has much to say to the New Confucians as well. As already mentioned, the New Confucians are part of a broader movement of cultural nationalism convinced that China's future must grow organically out of China's past, and connecting that past with the Confucian tradition. On the one hand, Xu seems to have little respect for the New Confucians, dismissing them as "grifters" and talking about the current generation of "vulgar Confucians." And it must be said that many of the self-proclaimed New Confucians are easy targets, having "reinvented" Confucian doctrine with considerable creativity. At the same time, Xu does not want to leave the Confucian tradition to the New Confucians, because he finds considerable value therein, as illustrated by his essay on "What Body for Confucianism's Lonely Soul?"

In part, this essay is meant to remind New Confucians (as well as Xu's readership) that Xu knows more about Confucianism than they do. Virtually all New Confucians write from a posture of partisanship,

cherry-picking data so as to present Confucianism as a harmonious, seamless whole. Like his fellow liberal, Qin Hui, Xu asserts that imperial rule was more legalist than Confucian; Confucianism provided moral cover for the Machiavellian designs of emperors and prime ministers across the ages. Still, he acknowledges the value of Confucian statecraft, honed over years of competition with emperors and wily ministers, but wonders how this wisdom is to be employed in twenty-first-century China. He wonders if Confucianism might be revived in a democratic system, its moral and patrician dimensions perhaps serving to blunt the naked power-grabs of lobbies and other interest groups, an elitist counterweight both to oligopoly and populism, but concludes that in the current regime it would serve only as less effective window-dressing than under the dynasties. He then goes on to explore the notion of a Confucian “religion,” a possibility launched by Kang Youwei in the late nineteenth century and embraced by his contemporary followers. Xu is skeptical of this as well, finding that Confucianism really cannot compete as a “religion of the heart” with Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and other rivals that speak the language of individual salvation. And he accuses Kang and his followers, of employing the notion of Confucianism as the national religion as a ruse to bring them back to power.

Xu is more open to the idea of Confucianism as a “civil religion,” a term he borrows from American anthropologist Robert Bellah. Like many Chinese, Xu is deeply troubled by the moral vacuum at the heart of China's secularized, consumerist society, where any means toward the end of wealth and power seems to be accepted. He reinterprets Confucianism less as the lynchpin of the dynastic politic order and more as the skein of relationships and rituals that held China's little society together. Xu insists that China needs this, both as a positive good in its own right and because a liberal order without a moral consensus on basic values can easily lose direction.

Xu explores similar themes in another essay entitled “After the ‘Great Disembedding’: Family-State, *Tianxia* and Self,” in which he employs Charles Taylor's notion of the “great disembedding” – the dissolution of the premodern world and the rise of the individual – to the Chinese experience. In a long discussion of self, family, state, and identity, Xu notes that a process that took several hundred years in Europe was compressed into merely a few decades in China, and was dominated by the rapid rise of the nation-state: “Contemporary China's deepest crisis is a crisis of the soul; society as a whole lacks a basic consensus on values and an ethical foundation. Once traditional Confucian values were rejected, the Chinese people lost their focus of identity, after which the nation and the state became secular objects for emotional catharsis.”

In this text, Xu is not necessarily advocating a return to Confucianism, although he compares it to various modern communitarian visions which seek to revive social bonds in the face of the overweening power of the state, the market, and consumerism. But if Confucianism – or some other form of revived tradition – proves to be the glue that enables Chinese society to hold together, Xu is prepared to endorse it. In Xu's liberalism, freedom of individuals and markets requires a functioning civil society.

Xu further develops his thoughts on the pertinence of tradition in his eulogy to a recently deceased giant of the Chinese intellectual world: "Li Shen zhi: The Last Scholar-Official, the Last Hero." Li was a devoted Communist Party member for much of his life, and turned to liberalism in his declining years. Yet his liberalism is not what interests Xu in this book. Instead, Xu Jilin praises Li Shen zhi as the "last scholar-official," eliding Li's lifelong idealism (first for communism, later for liberalism), with the long tradition of engaged scholar-officials *and* with the early history of the Chinese Communist Party:

Those that flocked to Communist base areas like Yan'an were, like Li Shen zhi, the best of China's youth, the hot-blooded elite of that generation's scholar-officials. In the hopes of realizing their democratic liberation, they were full of the spirit of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Li Shen zhi calls these CCP members "old-style CCP members."

And old-style is good! The old-style CCP members were the idealists of the CCP, twentieth-century scholar-officials who took spreading the Way as their personal mission. New-style CCP members enter the Party in pursuit of personal interests. The Party is a tool for them to climb official ranks and make money. But for old-style CCP members, the loves and hatreds of their lives were all poured into the Party. Their pride in the Party and fervor for their ideals are hard for later generations to understand. That they invested the feelings born of their red-blooded youth and their tragic love for their country is something that no one can disparage or deny. It was like cutting off their flesh to give to their mother; or taking out their bones to give to their father. Such devotion is indelible.

Elsewhere in the essay Xu compares Li to Wang Yangming and other similar Confucian figures in the late Ming, who believed that all people have the innate capacity to achieve sagehood. The portrait Xu offers of Li is stunning in its complexity; Li's simmering idealism embodied the best of the scholar-official, communist, and liberal traditions. Xu seems more impressed by his idealism than his liberalism. This is Xu's answer to Chinese intellectuals who use China's past to close doors, to limit future possibilities. I'm not sure Xu's is a liberal answer, and it is certainly not a secular answer, but Xu's tradition is rich with possibilities and contradictions, and is thus human and humane in ways that the brittle cult of the state can never be.

More than once over the past few years Xu Jilin has suggested, in private conversation, that he no longer sees himself as a liberal. I suspect that his reflections on traditions, continuities, and reappropriations are behind that remark, as his concern for China's moral vacuum has come to join his stances on the importance of individual freedom and rule of law. It is significant nonetheless that even as he explores the possibilities offered by China's modern history he does not feel compelled to create a "liberalism with Chinese characteristics," or to revive a liberal tradition in classical Chinese thought. The foreign origin of liberal ideas is in no way problematic for Xu; for him, one of the fruits of modernity and globalization is that all countries exist in a shared, if not homogenous, cultural space. It is that space that China must embrace if she is to fulfill her destiny and return to true great-power status. The essays in this volume offer the deep reflections of a mature Chinese patriot hoping to help his nation achieve that goal. China should join the world, but the world should also join China.

Translation Issues and Technical Tedium

I was first drawn to Xu Jilin's writings in large measure because of their readability, and I have tried to reproduce that pleasurable experience for readers in translating his essays from Chinese to English. This means that I have allowed myself considerable leeway as long as I felt Xu's meaning was preserved and the English text flowed smoothly. In other words, I have chosen not to litter the text with technical explanations of the literal meaning of Chinese expressions which, in a different setting, would surely be worthy of discussion. For similar reasons, where possible, I have added information identifying people mentioned and providing explanations that Xu himself might have added were he writing explicitly for a non-specialist reader in the text proper, rather than in translator's notes, without identifying brackets. In other words, where Xu's Chinese text says something like "the 'universal and homogenous state' feared by Kojève has already emerged," my translation reads "the 'universal and homogenous state' feared by the Russo-French philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1902–68) has already emerged." Of course, longer explications were sometimes required, and a certain number of translator's notes remain. There is also a glossary in which terms and concepts that recur repeatedly are defined and contextualized.

Xu Jilin quotes frequently from foreign authors in Chinese translation. In an ideal world, I would have liked to locate the cited passage in the original text, but this proved unduly time-consuming and thus practically impossible. Most of these Chinese translations are not

available in libraries outside of China, which meant that I could rarely know which editions of the original work they worked from. In addition, some Chinese translators seem to take considerable license in their work, because even when I could locate what I thought to be the correct edition of a translated work, I could not find the exact passage from the original. So what the reader finds here in almost all cases is my translation of the Chinese text cited by Xu. In some ways this is better, because Xu did not read the original, and whatever nuance might have been lost in the translation from Western language to Chinese was lost to Xu as well. It might be fascinating to follow the changes in meaning as texts go from one language to another, to be used in different discursive contexts, but such was not my goal in the present project.

On a similar theme, when Xu cites a foreign text in a footnote, he of course cites the Chinese version, which is meaningless to the English reader. Hence, I have altered “Hengtingdun, *Disan bo: Ershi shiji houqi minzhuhua langchao*” to read “Hengtingdun (Samuel Huntington) *Disan bo: Ershi shiji houqi minzhuhua langchao* (The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century),” on the premise that the reader might like to know.

Like the Southern Baptist ministers of my youth, Chinese intellectuals repeat themselves a lot. Xu sometimes repeats himself within the same text, in a manner that must be persuasive to Chinese readers, but often seems tedious in English. In many such cases I have taken the liberty of dispensing with what seem to be needless repetitions. There are repetitions of similar themes and arguments across different chapters as well, which is of course normal; Xu has a number of important points that he attempts to make in a variety of different arguments and contexts. I could find no way to eliminate these repetitions without damaging the structural integrity of individual chapters, which would have been unfair to a writer who successfully strives for harmony and balance in his prose style. So I must ask for the reader's forbearance, and assume they know how and when to skim.