

**A Dialogue on *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*:
Liberating the Object and an Inquiry into the Modern**

Wang Hui

translated by Tani Barlow

Shu Wei: In the 1980s your research interests focused on literature, mostly the work of Lu Xun, and then gradually you turned to the May Fourth era. In commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, you wrote a notable essay pointing out that the May Fourth generation had shared an “identity of attitude” rather than an “identity of methodology.” Likewise at the beginning of the 1990s, your research interests turned toward the question of modern Chinese scientism. For instance, the journal *Scholars* published a long text by you investigating the fate of “Mr. Science.” When your research entered the 1990s, there seems to have been quite a transformation; was this because your own research interests had changed or was it that you developed your original research path more profoundly?

Wang Hui: After I completed my research and writing on Lu Xun, I immediately turned to the study of the May Fourth Movement. The reasons for my turn in this direction are various and include the two issues you have raised. Because Lu Xun had been such a foundational and significant participant in the May Fourth literary movement, my grasp of Lu Xun is integral to my discussion of the May Fourth Movement. In the early 1990s when I began writing on “Mr. Science,” it was a natural extension of these interests, but when I began studying the matter, my original framework was demolished. Questions regarding “Mr. Science” simply could not be limited to the May Fourth period; I had to address matters related to late Qing thought. Propositionally speaking, a range of important theoretical questions must be considered in order to understand the role of “science” in the modern worldview. I spent a considerable time in research and reflection on this problem, considering it from both historical and theoretical perspectives, and my final conclusion was a thorough demolition of my original framework for writing the history of ideas. For instance, the subtitle of my 1991 publication, “The Fate of Mr. Science in China,” was “Scientific Concepts and Their Uses in Modern China,” which to all intents and purposes placed the science concept in a central position, while the fourth volume of *The Rise of Chinese Modern Thought, The Community of Scientific Discourse*, includes studies of both the scientific community and the community of scientific discourse or scientism, but my way of posing questions and methods of research drastically changed.

There is an intimate relation between the experience of our own historical processes and the exploration of a historically knotty problem of reflection on historical possibility in this book. When I began this research, it was undeniably in an era of tedium and pessimism. During the more than ten years, from initial concept to its completion, it took me to write *The Rise of Chinese Modern Thought*, these two topics never changed. Yet the experience common among scholars is that having embarked on research, history’s rich content and its internal logics suggest new directions. The book is divided into four central elements, “Principle and Things,” “Empire and Nation-State,” “Gongli and Anti-Gongli,” and “The Community of Scientific Discourse,” as a scholarly way of asking the following questions: How was the tianli worldview of the Song to Ming period Confucianism formed

and what was its historical motive force? What is the actual relationship between the founding of the Qing dynasty empire and the founding of the modern Chinese nation? Do the complex attitudes toward modernity in late Qing thought provide us with conceptual resources? How was the modern Chinese knowledge system constructed? What is the relation of the modern *gongli* worldview and *tianli* worldview? My research provides historical insight into questions such as What is China? What is modernity in China? and What is the historical significance of Chinese thought? My writing includes two questions that are intimately related to modernity: (1) What is Chinese identity? This question reflects on tendencies of social division inherent in modernity, it is also an exploration of the historical dialectic of diversity and identity; and (2) How do we understand modern social relations and their developmental trends, not only the concentration of power in modernism, but also what in Chinese thought overcomes this trend? Although these issues are connected to my work in the 1980s, I exceeded my earlier research ambitions and asked new questions.

SW: Writing this two-part, four-volume opus, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, was a long process, and the book's name underwent changes at publication. I recall that in 1998 the Harvard Yanjing Scholarly Series at Sanlian Press had already published a preview of the work under the title *The Concept of Science and the Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*. The book you have actually published spends nearly half of its space on "Discourse of Science," so can we presume that the central thread of *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* is still the question of the origins of the "concept of science?"

WH: Absolutely, the science question is one very important theme of the book, but strictly speaking, my concern really wasn't so much the science concept or the scientism question, but rather questions of the modern worldview and knowledge systems. In the introduction (导论), I seized upon an imbricated opposition of *tianli* (heavenly principles) and *gongli* (the axiomatic) to understand the modern worldview and core knowledge system. Then I employed these to link vast and complex political, economic, cultural, and social questions. As [Hans-Georg] Gadamer has said, "No matter how much dispute surrounds the period of its emergence or origin, the

concept of modernity is first explicitly defined as a scientific and methodological fresh concept. It took shape initially as part of Galileo's (伽里略) field of study, and then the first to establish the idea in philosophy was Descartes (笛卡尔)." The concept of the modern had a decisive influence not only in philosophy but in all disciplines. The Enlightenment movement believed that the particular character of scientific epistemology transcended all cultural traditions, religious backgrounds, political systems, and ethical structures and was a universally sanctioned principle. According to [Alasdair] MacIntyre (麦金泰尔), "the Enlightenment design is incarnated politically in the central manifestoes of the American and French Revolutions. Among philosophers, Hume (休谟), Diderot (狄德罗), Bentham (边沁), and Kant (康德) et al. expounded on these principles theoretically." Under what historical conditions did this worldview and intellectual genealogy take hegemonic form? What are its internal features? When you ponder these larger issues, the science question becomes a complex question of the scientific worldview.

Very early in my study of May Fourth and late Qing thought, my thinking took on two basic characteristics. First, summarizing the social movement of 1989 and the tragedies of China's contemporary historical process, I tried to seek out from the history of thought its internal contradictions, problems, and difficulties. Second, the 1980s cultural movements were characterized by Westernization, so in studying May Fourth and the late Qing in relation to this thought wave, it was trendy to concentrate on comparing and contrasting the West and China. An underdeveloped research question at that time was how to understand the traditional origins of modern thought. From the beginning of the 1990s, starting with my first essay, "The Fate of Mr. Science in China: The 'Concept of Science' in Modern Chinese Thought and Its Uses," and my study of Liang Qichao (梁启超), Wu Zhihui (吴稚晖), and others, one of my methods of research was to explore the structure of modern thought from the perspective of Chinese intellectual history. In later research I gradually strengthened my focus on the interaction between intellectual history and social history. Still, I never abandoned the study of ideas but turned my attention to the interactions between these questions, tendencies, and propositions in intellectual history and the history of society. There was a direct relationship between creating this methodol-

ogy and my attempts to reflect on questions of modernity from within Chinese thought and intellectual resources.

SW: Is it possible to say that you very explicitly linked the study of modern Chinese scientific concepts to the history of modern Chinese thought, paying particular attention to what is generally called the “modernity” (现代性) problem?

WH: Without question. Having analyzed the concept of science and the gongli worldview, I tried to open up the (谱系[系谱]的构成 [*sic*]) genealogical structure of modern knowledge. So in the process of studying late Qing thought, I traced this problem back to a structural question regarding the concept of tianli and used these two opposites and the tension between them to open up the analysis of history and exploration of theory. There is one thread running throughout *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* and that is the interaction between knowledge and system, as for instance, between tianli and the local bureaucracy (郡县制), gongli and modern nationalism and its related systems, and so on. What I have done is not a history of ideas. If there is one sentence that epitomizes my method, it is this: I strove to liberate the object of my study from its position as an object and to make it bolster my reflections and exploration. In research, the object of study is a structured point of view, which I employ to investigate our limitations.

Speaking from a methodological point of view, this orientation derives from dissatisfaction with two kinds of intellectual history. One kind is the history of philosophy or the history of ideas. The other is the social history method. The former method is well represented in the scholarship of Hu Shi, Feng Yulan and many scholars of neo-Confucianism. The latter is represented by Hou Waihu (侯外庐)’s edited volume *Complete History of Chinese Thought* and the various contemporary American scholars who use social history to write representative histories of thought. My dissatisfaction is not a simple disavowal. Actually, I have learned a lot from these two different traditions of study.

There are two important disadvantages with methods of philosophical history. One is that it uses Western philosophy’s categories and concepts to try to understand Chinese structures of thought, so in the comparative

structure itself there is a distortion of Chinese thought. Second, there is an overemphasis on the continuities of the history of ideas and the relationship between its key categories, while it is relatively rare to find an analysis of the historical conditions under which these concepts, categories, and basic propositions (论题) have been structured. The social historical method is highly concerned with thought and modes of production, sociopolitical relations; this is its most powerful aspect. But in this sort of research it is easy to meet with two profound difficulties. The first is that social history methodology is at base an outcome of a specific modern worldview, which means that from its methodological vantage point it is not possible to provide a genuine depiction of the significance of the social change or evolution itself; second, when the method of social history is used to establish the relationship between thought and society, and it is easy when the social history method establishes the relationship between thought and society. It is easy to lapse into a determinist structure in which the function of ideas as a constructive power is overlooked. Where my research has surely been influenced by social history norms is in its attention to the historicity of thought and its social implications, the relation of intellectual transformations and social evolution. From this perspective, the continuity of concepts actually is engaged with constructs of meaning in unceasing change.

My “research to liberate the object of study from the positionality of object, allowing me to bolster my reflection and exploration of the source of thought,” is a modification of one sort of social history. The method of social history is one structural way to classify and understand history. It focuses tightly on political, economic, social, and cultural interactions, but these basic classifications are not only the basic conceptual framework of the structure of social historical analysis, they are also the bedrock of modern disciplinary systems. Under this framework of such classification, we can discuss economic questions and questions of religion and military affairs of specific time periods, and evaluate the significance of these questions according to the logic of this framework. However, the establishment of such categories was a modern event, and so, in the final volume of the work, I analyze the process of how the category of “society” was produced. I also analyze the historical processes of how various concepts that we currently regard as natural or objective grew into being. In this sense, in reflecting

inclusion of history and thought knowledge not only twists the historical view but forfeits the opportunity for us to examine our own perspective.

For this reason, when we observe given historical changes, we cannot simply understand the historical development of ancient society by using nineteenth- and twentieth-century principles of classification. Not only is this methodology an annotative historical methodology, it is a methodology of reflecting on the place of modern knowledge. For instance, not only in modern social theory but also in the system of modern disciplines of learning, economics, politics, culture, ethics, education, and so forth are defined as particular spheres of knowledge and demarcated strictly in relation to each other, but economics is the soul that seeps into all the social sciences. However, it is only in the framework of nineteenth-century political economy, when the hegemony of capitalism in the nineteenth century predominated, that economics achieved such an important “significance.” Economics was not only used as a premise to explain ethics, politics, and other questions, it was in itself a type of ethics and politics, because it was not only a scientific study of economic activity but also a theoretical model for modern ethical and political activity. In early Confucianism, economics, military, education, and so on were all considered as organic components of “rites and music.” It was only in relation to the category of rites and music that their significance could be revealed. No matter whether it was the well-field [land-distribution] system or the school, no matter if it was managing political affairs or ways of behaving, we have no way of understanding the “historical significance” of these things if we depart from the framework of rites and music. If we say that the category of economics in modern society includes politics, law, ethics, and other kinds of meaning, and cannot be understood as a simplistic notion. So the category of rites and music also includes every aspect of politics, economics, law, ethics, and so on within itself, and cannot be defined according to categories of rites, morality, and ethics in modern knowledge.

As I indicated, “things” (物) must be grasped exclusively in relation to “principles” (理). For example, we cannot simply understand modern economics as a matter of relations between “things,” and we need to approach this research as a form of ethics. Moreover, in order to explain a “principle,” it must be placed in relation to “things,” as for instance in the fact that we

cannot consider the rites and music of the archaic period simply as an ethics or morality — here used as categories of modern thought. We need to situate this problem of “principles” or “rites,” which has always been reduced to a problem of ethical praxis, in the relations of “things” — relations of such institutions as politics, economics, military, pedagogic, and so on. “Things” are the genealogy of “principle” and “principle” is the genealogy of “things.” This is the so-called “order of things” and its evolution. If we categorize ancient literature through the modern classifications of economics, the military, education, and so on, then we will be unable to correctly grasp the actual historical significance of ancient literature. Indeed, we run into the same issue in regard to understanding modern knowledge — is this not exactly the problem raised by the sociology of knowledge, historical sociology, archeology of knowledge, and genealogy of knowledge from different perspectives?

Here, whether it is possible to interpret this process from the perspective of the research object becomes a very important question. I am not saying that we should abandon the discussion of social history or veer sharply off into a purely conceptual historical method or completely spurn the spirit of our own times. Instead, it is to demand that we liberate our research object from the status of object, which would enable a methodological vision that allows us to investigate ourselves and our times and provide a new angle on conditions of knowledge. In the discussion of “Principle and Things,” in volume 1, I tried to start from the differentiation between rites, music, and institutions, a methodological perspective, to reinterpret the establishment of tianli and the transformation of “things” discovered from within Confucianism. In this explanation, the clan system, equal-field system, double tax, politics of the north-south relation, economics, military, clans, and other social historical events all have a place in a particular vision of Confucianism. This method of explanation does not reduce these sorts of issues according to the modernist knowledge categories to a political problem, an economic problem, a military problem, and so on.

SW: Looking at the structural plan of the book, the last two volumes raise the most important content — “gongli,” “discourse of science,” and other questions — for discussion. In 1999, had you already conceived of the con-

tent for this format in large part? Since the first two volumes consider “Principle and Things,” “Empire and Nation,” and other related topics, this part seems as if it were researched to completion in the last few years. Volume 1 concentrates heavily on debates in neo-Confucianism of the Song through Ming dynasties and in early Qing dynasty thought, where you undertake some remarkable observations and explanations. You seem to be moving on social history, economic history, and institutional history, using an unusually broad period of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties and their changes in the relation of the state and society. According to your research, we see plainly that the background of the rise of the modern concept of gongli China is partly formed by concepts in neo-Confucianism and early Qing thought, which were also organic components of modern Chinese scientific discourse. Can we say that neo-Confucian concepts actually evince those in Song-era society and the nation had already shown modern transformation?

WH: I had already for the most part dealt with most of these questions in the early period of my writing, which nevertheless dealt primarily with the late Qing historical era and later. Later I would change the basic outline of the work. For instance, in a 1991 essay, I had already analyzed the concept of *lixue* or principle (particularly as regarded the concept of *gezhi* (格致) or the classic of the *Daxue*’s view of natural sciences) and its relation to contemporary concepts of science. Later I went through and examined questions in Yan Fu’s exegesis of the philosophy of Zhu Xi (朱子学). In the beginning of the 1990s, I developed a strong interest in classical philosophy (经学), and in 1993 at the University of California, Los Angeles, my discussions with Professor Ben Elman further strengthened my interest in these questions. But your analysis is basically correct: the writing of this part of the book went in reverse, in which I wrote the section on the late Qing period first and then wrote the rest on earlier periods. My understanding of neo-Confucianism and the school of classical learning (*jingxue*) developed gradually. In most cases I would send out a draft, and then in 1998 I began to research more systematically and to revise my draft; this revision took place after I withdrew the first iteration of the manuscript from Sanlian Press.

“The Tang Song transition” is a concept that Naito Konan (内藤湖南, 1866–1934) came up with half a century ago in the 1920s; following that, Miyazaki Ichisada (宫崎市定) and other Kyoto School scholars developed theses concerning “East Asian modernity” and “Song dynasty capitalism.” These scholars raised the question of Chinese “early modernity” through their discussions of the defeat of the aristocracy, the maturation of the local administrative control system, the development of long-distance trade, and standardization of the examination system (科舉). Miyazaki Ichisada also postulated that neo-Confucianism was a clear ethnonationalism (国民主义)—a nationalist (民族主义国家) ideology. I wanted to focus on the relationship of the “formation of tianli and the state of local administrative system” to analyze the transformation of Confucianism. This included a dialogue with questions the Kyoto School had raised.

The most important difference that I have with the Kyoto School regarding Song dynasty singularity is embodied in these two matters. First, unlike Miyazaki Ichisada, who considered neo-Confucianism as “modern philosophy” or “nationalism,” a doctrine compatible with the social transformation of the Song society in his description, I considered neo-Confucianism and its tianli to embody the tension and oppositional logics of this process; the historical relation of these two things was actually revealed as a process of antagonism. Methodologically speaking, the Kyoto School has a strong social history tendency. The core categories that they employ are inherited from the gradually accrued nineteenth-century European formations that prevented them from observing East Asia from an internal position. If the Song dynasty had been as the Kyoto School described it, an even more Chinese China, how ought this transformation be described from the perspective of Confucianism? In this sense, the Kyoto School’s basic theoretical framework and its historical narratives are derivations of European modernity. And second, which has an intimate relation to the above, the special qualification of the Kyoto School’s descriptions of Song society and its thought as “modern” (近代) comes from the conceptual analysis of modern Western nationalism and capitalism, whereas my descriptions, such as the “empire—national dualism,” seek to destroy this progressive unilinear evolutionary teleology. The Kyoto School historians, through their descriptions of a Song dynasty as a state with mature local administrative systems,

argued a thesis about “East Asian modernity” (东洋近世). The precondition of this argument was the historical relation of Western modernity and the nation-state system. They used the yardstick of the nation-state structure as their criterion of modernity. If this really was the case, then how would you describe the social structure of the Yuan dynasty, and more particularly, how would you understand the social system of the Qing? To resolve this, I used the concept of “empire with some limits” to break the historical narrative that overlaps empire and nation-state.

This tendency to overlap the two is quite explicit in the Kyoto School’s narration about “East Asian modernity.” The transformation of the Ming to the Qing dynasty, to all intents and purposes, has no place in this model of the “Tang-Song transition.” So will it be problematic to define the transition from the Qing to the republican period as that from an empire to a state? For that reason, if we say that the Song period incorporates some elements of “early modernity,” we must present our problem anew in a framework that differs from the Kyoto School’s, breaks free from a temporal teleology of modernity, and transcends nationalist knowledge. The reason I explicate the concepts “temporal circumstances” (時勢) and “circumstances of principle” (理勢) is that I want to provide a historical framework different from temporal teleology and at the same time internal to the Confucian worldview of that time and to its theories of knowledge.¹ If we take into account Benedict Anderson’s work on concepts of temporality and nationalism, the significance of the category of “temporal circumstances” can be even more adequately understood in the history of dynastic change. As regards the understanding of the relationships between “universal perspective and the modern nation,” it fits well with my notion of “tianli and local administrative system,” for both sets of relations are obviously imbricated and similar. From a vertical angle we juxtapose the relation of tianli and Han-Tang society with that of universality and Qing society. Chapters 1 and 2 of volume 1 are given over to a painstaking analysis of this issue. Through this sort of contrast of complex historical relations, we become more fully capable of deciphering the historical conditions of the construction and development of China’s modern identity.

IN: On the basis of your reading of Wei Yuan, Kang Youwei, Liao Ping,

and other late Qing thinkers, you come up with the subject of “empire and nation” and open up the notions of nation and internation as well as the “concept of Confucian empire” in the late Qing Gongyang School. It seems that a lot of scholars have paid particular attention to the concepts you raised of “Confucian universalism” and “Confucian empire.” These are the results of the most recent years of your scholarship. Besides the imperatives of your own research trajectory, were you also compelled in this direction by your engagement with the debate over “imperialism”?

WH: Since the nineteenth century, research on so-called premodern history has all been placed into the category of history of empire. Last century during the 1960s, S. N. Eisenstadt’s *The Political System of Empire*, a book conceived in the Weberian framework, synthesized the historical study of the world’s great civilizations and placed all the so-called premodern histories into the concept of the “political system of empires.” This rubric grew out of the binary of “empire vs. nation-state” in nineteenth-century European political economy. Within this dualism, empire constituted the reverse characteristics of modernity. Even when a certain relationship between empire and modernity was acknowledged, it was only handled in a retroactive way that derogates empire. For instance, what is the origin of despotism and authoritarianism in the modern nation-state? Why is the modern nation unable to rid itself of its indwelling characteristic violence? Symptoms of the crisis of modernity were traced back to the historical relation of the modern world and empire.

My research has been directed against this notion: dissatisfied with the nationalist narratives’ banal domination of the field, I opened discussion on the Confucian empire. Twentieth-century historical studies have been, on the one hand, largely controlled by a nation-state framework, and on the other hand, they are often rooted in the history of nineteenth-century European capitalism. Thus the research on early empire and its state construct, economic systems, transregional communications, and other factors have frequently been assimilated into a modernist teleology. Concomitant with the rethinking of analysis of the nation-state system and the development of transnational or global practices, people have started to focus on the historical experience of the early empires and the transition of empire to modern

nation-state. Regarding the legacy of early empires, besides what is mentioned above as transregional intercourse, issues such as political structures and cultural identities based on multiethnicities, self-colonization, centralization of power, and the complex relation of the empire and the rise of the nation-state are now questions that are deeply involving scholars.

Given the contemporary European Union, the formation of the political and economic cooperation of the Asia region, and the existence of the contemporary United States in the world, it is of great importance to rethink the relation of early empire to nation-state as a means of better understanding contemporary globalization. In my volume *Empire and Nation-State*, I singled out the following sorts of questions. First, how did Confucianism legitimate the Qing as a Chinese dynasty? How were the pluralistic identities internal to the empire, its plural political/juridical systems within the empire, constructed? As I point out on the one hand, an important step the Qing rulers took was to create a sense of “Chinese kingliness” or the Qing as a Chinese dynasty. On the other hand, the scholar-gentry also exploited legitimate Confucianism to criticize the ethnic hierarchy of the dynastic system. They thus connected some propositions of Confucianism with the problem of equality in a given historical context.

Second, so what actually was historical relation between the construction of the empire and the construction of the nation given the nineteenth-century writers’ tendency to put empire in opposition to the nation-state? What was the relation of tributary system and treaty system? How were Confucian classics appropriated in praxis of modern international relations? How was such imperial knowledge, the Confucian classics, integrated into a new type of “Confucian universalism” in the wake of colonialism? Speaking from the perspective of Confucian studies, my research is an alternative to methods that examine Confucianism from a purely modern philosophical, conceptual, ethical, or academic historical position. In political history, as I point out, Confucianism can be grasped as a kind of knowledge legitimation, with its various configurations completely associated with dynastic systems and their legitimation. In the absence of this point, it is impossible to understand the historical significance of Confucianism. The first two volumes, the “Principle and Things” and “Empire and Nation-State” deal

with different types of questions: of the relation of tianli and centralized administration, and the relation of classicism and systems in the empire; but the methodologies of research are internally related.

There are two different tendencies in contemporary debates on empire. One concerns reflection on the “post nation” and the globalization question. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s book *Empire* has probably been the influence. The other tendency is “empire studies,” which comes from those who are dissatisfied with the national framework or seek to reopen the case, starting over on the empire issue. This approach is embodied in many historians’ efforts to rediscover the history of early empires and to transcend the existing predominant narrative approach centered on the nation-state. Here we can see the connection between these two, the response to a contemporary crisis and the study of history, but avoid making a jumble of them. The second volume of my book, “Empire and Nation-State,” is more closely related with the second tendency. In 1999 while I was at the University of Washington, I completed a part of my study of the section on New Text Confucianism, and I had gradually resolved the loose ends. I spent one year from the fall of 2000 at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin as a senior fellow. There I encountered a group of scholars, all specialists in empire history, who suited me well and who were preoccupied with research into empire. We organized a comparative empire research group, which met for discussion over the year. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, a specialist in Southeast Asian colonial history; Muzaffar Alam, a specialist of the Mogul Empire; anthropologist Andreas Wimmer, a specialist of European nationalism; Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, a specialist in the history of Latin American colonialism; Partha Chatterjee, a representative of the Subaltern Studies Group; Philippe Burrin, a specialist of Nazi history; and I were among the most active. We agreed that our ambition would be to reopen the study of “empire” and that we had the capacity to renew questions in this historical research area, to leap over the status quo and surpass the way that the nation-state had previously been the central issue. The purpose of my work on empire is to transcend the historical narrative of the nation-state. To some degree, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* is one part of this attempt.

A friend once asked me, Why is it that when you are analyzing Chinese

questions you do not use *tianxia*, an indigenous or “Confucian” concept, and hold onto the word *empire*? First off, only after my critique of nineteenth-century political economy and the twentieth-century binary of “empire and nation,” and only after I teased out the significance of this term in the Chinese language, did I use the concept of “empire.” During the nationalist wave at the end of the nineteenth century, the word *empire* was already a part of Chinese thought and had a conceptual genealogy. From then on it became a category of Chinese thought through the processes of conceptual translation. We cannot consider this concept or word as extrinsic to Chinese thought. Second, the term *tianxia* has foundation not limited to Confucianism but related to the natural universe in Chinese thought and the world of rites and music, dated to antiquity. We can also find similar expressions in other civilizations, such as in the Christian and Islamic representations of universalisms similar to the concept of *tianxia*. At this level, to consider *tianxia* as representative of the uniqueness of China might not be the product of profound reflection. Speaking from the perspective of political analysis, *tianxia* cannot be equated with China as a particular political body. An analytic distinction better than overstretching the concept of *tianxia* is Gu Yanwu’s use of it to distinguish between “the collapse of *tianxia*” and “the collapse of the dynasty.” Gu and other Confucianists endowed this distinction with meaning, so if we use *tianxia* to describe a dynasty or a political entity, then we lose Gu’s point. This is precisely why in my book I discuss the differentiation that Gu Yanwu made between *guo* and *tianxia*, as well as discuss the concept of “tian” or heaven and its complex relation to pre-Qin rites and music, but I do not use the concept of *tianxia* as a descriptive category for studying the Qing period. The category of *empire*, on the other hand, is a precise description of the entity of political economy, which is not the same as *tianxia*. *Tianxia* is a form of self-expression based on a kind of universalism. That is not to say that the concept of *tianxia* is not worth analyzing; and in reality, in many chapters of the book I discussed this category and its many different historical connotations.

IN: The first step in your scholarship was “how did the science concept figure into modern Chinese thought?” And recently, you have laid out this problem far more clearly, concretely, and richly: the transformation of the

model of Chinese empire (from empire to nation), the internal evolution of neo-Confucianism (from tianli to gongli), the formation of the community of scientific discourse, the initial confirmation and assurance of a modern Chinese identity, and so on are summarized in the book's introduction as the general thesis of "modern Chinese identity." By this do you hold that the rise of Chinese thought is actually a continuous process of questioning and pursuit of Chinese modernity?

WH: I began my earliest work discussing the question of science in Chinese thought. My initiative had two objectives. First was a simple comparative question of the concept of science in the so-called history of thought and its development, or, that is to say, the question of how the concept of science and the system of science came into China's conceptual worldview. The second question was relatively more complex and concerned the relationship of the scientific worldview and modern society. It is not possible to locate a solution to this question through some category of the history of thought. In my "Several Questions Regarding Scientism and Social Theory," I encapsulated the relationship of science and society in a philosophic discussion. In this way I presented the idea that the science question was a pivotal link in the more general discussion of modernity. No matter whether I was investigating the renewal of the neo-Confucians or reanalyzing the imperial system, I focused my research on undermining the stability of the category of modernity. This is the presupposition of every chapter of the book, to question modernity.

At the beginning of the 1990s, some friends and I began discussions on the relationship between classics and history. The question that we came up with after subjecting it to theoretical and historical questioning was if Zhang Xuecheng's statement "the six Classics are all history" (六经皆史) uses the term *jing* (经) or classics to renew an older concept of "history" (史), then could we not reverse this maneuver and say "history" (史) is the classics (经)? This concept of "history" as intimately bound to the study of the classics is completely distinct from the nineteenth-century prescription of the category of "history." As part of a modern worldview and system of knowledge, the concept of "history" (历史) was born in the nineteenth century, and it has a close relation to the historical outlook of Hegel, Marx,

and other representative thinkers. But where the irrefutable difference lies is with this observation: the narrative of history is absolutely not a positivistic expression of impersonal annals; it always includes specific worldviews and values. Given this, all historical narratives have an internal theoretical formatting. In his own time, Adam Smith was considered a historian, but his historical work, *The Wealth of Nations*, is a comprehensive presentation of *theories* of political economy. As I have demonstrated in my book, the “history” (史学) of the Confucians was a unique configuration, and its singularity consisted of providing philosophic answers to the questions that philosophic Confucians asked. I set off to open up historical analysis that probed into a more theoretically informed history. I cannot conceal the modality of *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*’s internal structural questions. I did not use the concept “the history of modern Chinese thought” but rather chose a more flexible “the rise of modern Chinese thought” as a caption, for the primary reason of avoiding any reductive, backward move toward the sources of China’s modern thought. From the perspective of historical sociology, the production of new, dominant concepts always accompanies transformation of the social structure and is part of a more extensive social process. If scientific epistemology actually transcends all cultural traditions, religious backgrounds, political systems, or moral organizations, then we cannot really restrict the significance of scientific questions in the classification of modern disciplines. This is why I could not avoid opening up a more comprehensive historical itinerary.

In fact, when we liberate the object from its object status, can we still really describe so-called “modernity”? My objective in proceeding with this sort of vast structural description of “modernity” is not to fix the significance of modernity temporally but to undermine the self-description of this modernity and to inspire our thinking on the rise of Chinese modern thought as such.

I agree with your generalization: *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* is actually a continuous query into modern Chinese identity and positionality, an unceasing discovery process. “Identity” itself is a multifaceted experience of constant change, not just for the individual person but for social groupings in society; all are governed by it. When I query “the establishment of tianli” and dynastic states based on patriarchal clan systems in feudal soci-

ety, the land system, the tax system, the Yi Xia debate in the Song, and so on, this also expresses that the construction of this new worldview is closely related to the reconstructing of values in a society. When I bring up all questions of the Confucian modality of classical learning and the Qing dynasty's Chinese dynastic legitimacy, questions of the legal system, the Manchu Han question, the axial issue of tribute system and international relations, it also indicates that the appearance of newly cast forms of philosophic Confucianism is also closely related to the reconstructing of identity and values in a society. When I bring up the gongli worldview and the nation-state, the social system, questions of rights and cultural movements and link them together, I'm actually at the same time discussing a new style of identification and its internal contradictions and difficulties.

I began my probing of different meanings of the category "China" to liberate it from "national identity" in the unsophisticated European nationalist model. "China" is a category that is richer, more flexible, and more profound than "nation" and is capable of including many other kinds of categories, of recomposing the legitimacy of dynasties founded by ethnicities other than the Han and redeeming the relations of equality among ethnicities and figuring different political relations of tribute and diplomacy, opening the singular flexibility and adaptability of the category of "China." In the contemporary world, this kind of rich historical experience can help us overcome the limits of nationalism and imagine a prospective China, even provide a space of imagination, to bring into being a new political project. This is the category shaped by this great civilization, its rich history, and profound traditions of thought.

IN: In the two appendices of the book where you address "Local Dialects," "National Forms," and "Imagining Asia," among other questions, the texts are rather special. It appears as if in this you have exceeded the categories of historical thinking laid out in the book itself. Are the questions that these appendices raise a preview of your future studies?

WH: I presented the essay "A Theoretical Debate about Local Forms, Dialects, and 'National Form' during the Anti-Japanese War" at the Taiwan Literature and Philosophy Institute, Academia Sinica, in 1997 at a research conference. In the volume of "The Community of Scientific Discourse," I

use the perspective of scientific discourse to discuss the May Fourth vernacular literature movement's formation, but I did not have an opportunity then to treat the question of local dialects and their relation to nationalist movements. Consequently, at the same time in "Empire and Nation-State" and in "Gongli and Anti-gongli," I analyzed the late Qing rise of official nationalism and its internal struggles. However, again I did not have the opportunity to discuss the question of popular nationalism. So the essay on local forms exactly fits the two topics I just mentioned to supplement the others, and some of the ideas are available in the introduction to this book.

The research essay "The Genealogy of the Asia Imaginary" I gave in 2000 at a scholarly convention in Tokyo on the topic of "Changing Asia." In contemporary European thought, "the binary of empire and state" is closely related to the question of Asia and Europe, the East and the West. This essay demonstrated this fact from a number of different perspectives. Whether or not we are researching early modern history, we can never ignore intra-Asian relations. Rebecca Karl's book *Staging the World* comes from this perspective and discusses the Philippines, Turkey, India, Transvaal, and other oppressed, colonized societies' nationalism in relation to China's, and their imagination of social struggle. This essay was just a reading note. It is absolutely not opening up research into the material question of the complexity of Asia's historical interactions. But it provides a perspective for one to turn back and grasp the content of the prior volumes "Empire and Nation-State" and "Gongli and Anti-Gongli," and might lead to some conclusions that I did not have the space to elaborate on in this book.

Both essays deal with China's wars and revolution and their influence on the renewal of China and Asia. This is content that I did not address in *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, and it is a serious challenge that I would like to research and develop in the future. Starting in the 1970s, we have been continuously dealing with the question of the historical tidal wave of "derevolution." That is why our understanding of this historical era, if not overlooked totally, is largely enslaved by this "derevolution." Today our distance from the twentieth century seems even further away than our distance from the nineteenth century. It seems as though the twentieth century has coalesced into an element in a long nineteenth century. Of course, one cannot claim to understand the twentieth century without considering

war, revolution, and their historical contexts. For instance, how can we ever understand why the “Cold War” is not yet completely gone in Asia if we do not consider these historical movements; how could we understand the internationalist tradition of the twentieth century otherwise? In the absence of a historical dialogue with these historical movements, how will we ever get out of this interminable nineteenth century?

The crisis of the contemporary world is the crisis of the postrevolutionary era.

Note

1. See Claudia Pozzana and Alessandro Russo, “Circumstances, Politics, and History: Reading Notes on Wang Hui’s “General Introduction” to *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*” in this volume for the translation of 時勢.

Copyright of Positions is the property of Duke University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.