

## THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

*On Wang Hui's Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*

SINCE THE 1990s, Wang Hui has been an agenda-setting figure in the contemporary Chinese intellectual landscape. A leading representative of China's 'New Left', he has been at the centre of public debates since the publication of his path-breaking essay, 'Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity', which aroused fierce and enduring intellectual controversy. Under his editorship, China's principal journal of ideas, *Dushu*, became the forum of many key theoretical disputes and policy discussions. His forced resignation from the journal in 2007 ignited another debate among the Chinese intelligentsia, as readers polarized over its political line and intellectual quality during his tenure. In contrast to all this uproar, however, his *magnum opus* *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, whose four volumes appeared in 2004, caused scarcely a political ripple.<sup>1</sup> Applauded by the left, and well received by many scholars of modern Chinese intellectual history, it met with almost universal silence from his political adversaries.

Silence, because this is such a massive and original book that without ample knowledge of the topics with which it deals, covering the evolution of Chinese thought across hundreds of years, no political attack on it could be taken seriously; but also because of the sheer length and complexity of the work, daunting for any ordinary reader. In what follows, I will try to overcome some of the barriers to an understanding of *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (hereafter abbreviated as *Rise*), first by situating both its grandeur and its intractability in a comparative historical context, then setting out its principal themes and arguments, and finally

offering a critical judgement of the enterprise of the book as a whole, and of its place in Wang Hui's developing work.

### I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UNDERTAKING

The overarching objective of *Rise* is the search for the 'seeds' of an alternative modernity, distinct from that of the West and capable of avoiding its ailments, in intellectual legacies of the long Chinese past. As a project, this undertaking belongs to a historically well-established pattern among thinkers from the colonial, semi-colonial, ex-colonial or even just non-Western world—the political impulse to recover traditional cultural resources to resist the pretensions of a supposedly universal 'modernization' sprung from the West. Famous examples of this pattern stretch from Ireland to Turkey, Peru to Iran, India to Japan. In different ways and registers, Yeats and the Gaelic Revival, Ziya Gökalp and José Carlos Mariátegui, Jamal-al-din Al-Afghani and Vinayak Savarkar, Mahatma Gandhi and Kita Ikki, all shared this impulse—and the roll-call could be extended. Few movements for national liberation in the Third World have been exempt from it.

But if Wang Hui's project can be regarded as cognate with this range of earlier ventures, by reason of historical situation it is also distinguished from them. By the end of the twentieth century, China was no longer a semi-colonial country, even if it had still not achieved full territorial unity. On the other hand, the hegemonic power of Western—American-led—capitalism was globally greater than ever before, with a quite new capacity, cultural and economic, to penetrate to the innermost pores of society in what was once the Second or Third World. Nor was this merely an external imposition, since within China itself an increasingly endogenous capitalist society was visibly taking shape. However closely inter-related, the forces to be resisted were two-fold. In this respect, *Rise* is in some ways closer to critical works produced within the West itself, resembling Raymond Williams's effort to reconstruct the line of English romanticism, and its sequels, as resources for the critique of industrial capitalism in *Culture and Society*.

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, *Xiandai Zhongguo Sixiang de Xingqi* comes in two volumes, each in two parts. But since neither of the volumes has a subtitle indicating what the parts have in common, or why they belong together, it seems simpler to refer, as will be done below, to the whole set as they exist physically, in four volumes, each with its own title.

A second difference lies in the transformation in the forms of intellectual production over the intervening century, since the days of the Gaelic Revival or the Young Turks. Typical earlier advocates of national liberation appealed to pre-capitalist legends, customs, religious beliefs, forms of community or authority, in an often mythicized fashion. By contrast, Wang Hui's *Rise* is a work of professional modern scholarship, answering to the protocols of accuracy and evidence of the contemporary academy. It is not, of course, alone in that—other Third World intellectuals have equally been engaged in scholarly rediscovery of the pre-capitalist past in their countries. An obvious example would be Partha Chatterjee, excavating traces of spontaneous societal rationalization in certain Indian kingdoms before the British invasion. But here China's exceptionally well-preserved record of its pre-capitalist civilization has allowed a much more systematic attempt to recover the past, for uses of the present. Wang Hui could draw on a much longer continuous tradition of writing and thinking than any of his peers within the Third World, or indeed the West. As a codified system, scriptural Confucianism dates from the third century BC and lasted all the way down to the early twentieth century.

There then occurred—before and during the May Fourth movement of 1919—one of the most radical breaks in cultural continuity anywhere in the world, surpassed perhaps only in Turkey; followed by a second break in 1949. This intellectual terrain has double implications for Wang Hui's undertaking. On the one hand, the 'seeds' of an alternative modernity could be located much further back than anything with which Western readers might be familiar: Plato, Aristotle. On the other hand, after the upheavals of the twentieth century, such traditional resources would be considerably stranger and more remote to the average Chinese reader today than anything Arab readers could find in Al-Afghani or English could find in Williams.

A third difference lies in the contemporary intellectual context in China itself. Wang Hui is not the only scholar engaged in rediscovering China's pre-capitalist history for present use. In recent years, the economic rise of the People's Republic has brought a resurgence of national pride at state and popular levels, among whose forms of expression have been renewed acclaim for Confucius, as a legend to be conjured with in blockbuster movies, celebrity television shows and overseas language institutes. It has also seen a significant increase of cultural confidence among the Chinese intelligentsia, many members of which have turned

their eyes to the country's pre-capitalist past to construct a prospect that differs from what the West has to offer. Two examples will suffice. Zhao Tingyang, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, draws inspiration from the feudal order of the Zhou dynasty (11th–3rd centuries BC) for the conception of a new world system, which he calls *tianxia tixi* (under-the-heaven system), to replace Western arrangements of global power; Jiang Qing, a leading scholar in the recent revival of Confucianism, proposes a 'tricameral' representative system as an alternative to Western bicameral models. Most contemporary Confucian scholars tend to think that Confucian moral and political education, and traditions of civil-service examinations and consultative politics, can and should play an active role in today's China. The Chinese Communist Party also self-consciously appropriates Confucianism to relieve its ideological poverty, although its own history of anti-Confucian revolution blocks the explicit use of Confucian language.

In this competitive environment, Wang Hui occupies a unique position. His systematic study of Confucianism can be dated back to the early 1990s, though it was never widely known until the publication of *Rise*. His work is more like a geological survey than a commercial advertisement. He is less interested in promoting any given strand of the past in the present than describing the trajectory of major paradigmatic changes from antiquity to the contemporary world. If modern paradigms prove to be inadequate, pre-capitalist resources may establish their standing. This intellectual strategy is calculated to have a double effect. On the one hand, because Wang Hui does not write in a normative tone, his work may not impress many readers as a striking alternative project. On the other hand, in the long run his undertaking may be more durable in clearing the ground for effective construction.

### *Before and after Tiananmen*

What were the origins of this project? Born in 1959, and educated at Yangzhou and Nanjing universities, Wang Hui won recognition in the 1980s for highly original work on China's greatest modern writer, Lu Xun (1881–1936), which sketched a portrait that was much more complicated than the received images of him. He showed a Lu Xun who vehemently opposed China's darkest traditions, but could clearly see that he himself was also trapped by them, and was suspicious of those who thought themselves immune to their infection. Denouncing relations of domination in

the past, he sensed that under every project of modernity, new relations of domination were being produced, and would be reproduced in the future. Yet he was not overwhelmed by his own despair, but rather fought tragically with it, and found the meaning of his life in this permanent struggle. It is from here that Wang Hui seems to have drawn the inspiration for his own intellectual work and social criticism, for like Lu Xun he came to reject any simple notion of linear temporality or optimistic belief in progress, and to suspect domination behind any number of masks, whether 'development' or 'harmony' or other fair-sounding slogans.

In the 1980s, most intellectuals of Wang Hui's generation believed they had entered an age of 'New Enlightenment' whose destiny was to complete the unfinished mission of the May Fourth movement. According to the philosopher Li Zehou's later popularized reading, this had involved two battles: a struggle against feudalism and a struggle for national survival. But before long, the second displaced the first, leaving the task of enlightenment unfinished. In such a horizon, socialist practice in China was reduced to its contribution to the country's continued existence. Since it was not enlightenment, the implication was that it might indeed be a new form of feudalism. In the context of the 1980s, it seemed to follow that a new movement for enlightenment could only pursue an agenda set by the West.<sup>2</sup> From his publications in the 1980s, it is plain that Wang Hui had considerable reservations about such deductions. But he shared the sentiments of his generation. It was these that brought him to Tiananmen Square in 1989.

The crackdown of June Fourth shocked the great majority of Chinese intellectuals, including Wang Hui. In the reactions which ensued, many people decided that the radicalism and immaturity of the students were also responsible for this tragic outcome. Since the students thought they were following the precedent of the May Fourth movement, many inferred that it was May Fourth itself that had engendered a political

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<sup>2</sup> Jin Guantao, one of the leading liberal intellectuals of the 1980s, published a book in 2000 with a title very like that of Wang Hui's work, *The Origins of Modern Chinese Thought*; the two sharing a concern with the problem of scientism in modern China. Jin's scope, however, is more restricted—his aim is to explain the origins of communist culture in twentieth-century China. Like Hayek, he understands socialism as one of the forms of the misuse of science, and his study implicitly points to the ways in which science is used rightly. In effect, for Jin a Western-style modernity, plus some local reflection, can serve China well. Wang Hui's project would be more ambitious.

radicalism bound to lead to violent conflict. Through this lens, the revolutionary pursuit of equality in the twentieth century came to be viewed as a pathological phenomenon, antithetical to individual freedom. Meanwhile, the Chinese government was pushing forward marketization, enveloped in a neo-liberal discourse presenting it as inseparable from modernization. What was called ‘the reflection on radicalism’ gradually merged with this discourse of modernization, resulting in a roseate image of the emancipation to be delivered by private property and market economy, as harbingers of a ‘democratic politics’ far preferable to the social revolutions of the twentieth century.

As a direct participant in the upsurge of 1989, Wang Hui also reflected upon the self-defeating elements in that movement. But he would not go so far. For him, it was anachronistic to picture socialist China as if it were a feudal autocracy, and naive to regard the market as an escape hatch from repression by the state. In his eyes, the Chinese Revolution remained an important source of criticism for the current society. But he was also under pressure to explain all the forms of domination and repression that had scarred the Revolution, highlighted by its opponents to deny it any legitimacy. Wang Hui was thus forced to reflect further, not only on capitalism and neo-liberalism, but also on a series of premises that both capitalism and socialism had seemingly shared. The result was the ‘problem of modernity’—*xiandaixing*: a term rarely used at the time—that he would make his own.<sup>3</sup>

The embryo of *Rise* was conceived within two years of Tiananmen, in 1991. It was the trauma of the crackdown which seems to have driven Wang Hui to reflection on the self-defeating elements of the May Fourth movement in 1919. Famously, the two catchwords of that movement were ‘Mr Democracy’ and ‘Mr Science’. Wang Hui resolved to study these two key terms in depth. He started with science—in the dreary political environment after 1989, a natural decision. But his choice was not simply a reflection of it. For he decided that the students in Tiananmen Square had shared much the same uncritical faith in science as the party leaders they opposed. In the 1990s, the cult of science was then adjusted to

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1980s ‘modernization’—*xiandaihua*—was an everyday word in the academic world, but only a few young scholars in literature used ‘modernity’, mostly as a synonym for ‘modernism’, in the wake of Fredric Jameson’s seminar at Beijing University in 1985, when he introduced the term by way of contrast with post-modernity. But this usage had little currency until the 1990s.

support the shift towards marketization and privatization of the post-Tiananmen period. Wang Hui's first stepping-stones towards *Rise* were essays published in the journal *Xueren*, concentrating on the concepts and uses of science in key thinkers of the May Fourth period. Soon afterwards, post-doctoral research in the US, where he became attracted to social history and benefited from exchanges with the leading Qing scholar Benjamin Elman, broadened his field of enquiry significantly. There he started to engage with the dichotomy of 'empire' and 'nation-state'—an interest strengthened by subsequent year-long discussion in Berlin with a group of scholars working on the history of empires—and to express his dissatisfaction with this binary opposition, as incapable of explaining the complexities of Chinese history, especially the order of the Qing dynasty.

Compared with his focus on the fortunes of science in China, it is less immediately clear what prompted Wang Hui's turn towards this second problematic. In due course, he would offer an explanation of the way in which they are integrated in the four volumes of *Rise*, to be considered below. What is clear is that a certain imbalance between the two layers of his research has left its mark on the work. The problematic derived from 'science'—which becomes in effect a historical epistemology—takes up almost three quarters of all the space; that derived from 'empire/nation-state', a later stratum of research, occupies the second volume and is present in the first, but much less salient in the third and fourth. In order of composition, the last volume, *Community of the Discourse of Science*, was actually Wang Hui's earliest undertaking—at least half of its chapters were drafted in the early 1990s. Likewise all three chapters in the third volume, *General Principles and Anti-General Principles*, were drafted in the early and mid-1990s. It seems likely, therefore, that most of the first volume, *Reason and Things*, was the third to be written, leaving the second, *Empire and State*, as the last in chronological sequence. The whole work is, however, preceded by a Prologue of a hundred pages that can be taken as its real finale. Plainly written after the four books, it in some measure offsets the imbalance between them by expanding Wang Hui's reflections on empire and nation-state, thus giving these the last word. Such, at any rate, is a conjectural reconstruction of how the work came to be written. But at times Wang Hui also worked simultaneously on different parts of it. The result is that, much like shifts in geological strata, the various layers of the book more than once collide and become embedded in each other. The end product of these movements is an

extremely ambitious, and complicated, bid to capture the development of Chinese thought across a millennium.

### *Pathways*

What is the methodology of this enterprise? One way of looking at it is to consider the title of the book: *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*. All of the first three key words, 'rise', 'modern' and 'Chinese', carry very deep implications. Firstly, what is meant by 'modern' here? Does Wang Hui bring a structured concept of modernity, such as one can find in Weber or Habermas, to the study of Chinese history? The answer is no. When he discusses Western modernity, he follows Weberian or Habermasian usage. But the modernity or 'early modernity' he seeks in Chinese history is an open possibility rather than a structured project. The only thing we know about its meaning is that it involves the emergence of new pathways, not the replication of any version of modernity confected in the West.

In a series of discussions after the publication of the book, Wang Hui has employed the notion of 'recurrent early modernities' in Chinese history. Typical phenomena of such early modernities may have been the development of commodity exchange, an increasing sense of social fluidity and even equality, a consciousness of historical discontinuity. The concept is, of course, a challenge to the Hegelian-Marxian-Weberian picture of imperial China, as a social order at a standstill. But Wang Hui also refuses to accept those historical accounts that would have China either basically following, or narrowly missing, a path comparable to the Western route to modernity. For him, the Kyoto School of Japanese historians—Naitō Konan or Miyazaki Ichisada—who claimed to have found the same features of early modernity that characterized the West in the China of the Song dynasty, made the first mistake; while those who regretfully believe that China at some point missed the chance of building capitalism, or a nation-state, or a form of rationality based upon competition, make the second. The prevailing paradigm—a historical quest in the form of 'why China did not breed x, y, z' or 'China used to exhibit x, y, z, but failed to preserve them'—needed to be replaced by close readings of Chinese history, in full awareness that this history followed its own logic and bred quite different possibilities.

Different, yes; but then is there any further content left to the term 'modern'? Wang Hui does not reveal more. The reason why he uses 'modern'

in such a strange—one might say paradoxical—way is probably strategic. He could have simply abandoned the term if he had sought to address only those sympathetic to his effort to discover China's own dynamics. But in a discursive world dominated by the West, this risked being trapped within the binary opposition 'traditional/modern': since you do not claim to be modern, you are traditional, and therefore you can be totally ignored. Since Wang Hui wanted to reach an international as well as a national readership, an apparently conventional usage of 'modern' might help him gain some discursive space.

Secondly, what does the 'rise' of the title signify? If 'modern' is a floating signifier without structured meaning, 'rise' does not correspond to a certain moment in history either. Rather, in every moment of history where new possibilities occur, there is a rise—that is, a will to reform, to bring something new to the table.<sup>4</sup> Such rises are the result of two forces: *shishi*—the propensity of the time—and human agency.<sup>5</sup> Periodic alterations of *shishi* outdate established viewpoints and practices, and human agency brings new viewpoints and practices into being. Therefore, 'rise' is to be understood as *shengsheng*, a continuous reproduction breeding its sequels in an endless succession.<sup>6</sup> Even in the late Qing and Republican periods, when intellectuals spread Western ideas in a seemingly voluntarist fashion, an alternative native modernity was still 'rising'. Today people scarcely remember this because these native resistances to Western modernity failed. But every such episode, even if abortive, prepares resources for the next. Wang Hui's undertaking is to retrieve the resources accumulated across these episodes for future use. Obviously, such a notion of 'rise' is a resolute break with the linear temporality of modernity.

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<sup>4</sup> In the book itself, Wang Hui never explicitly sets out this conception, leaving his title open to the misinterpretation that 'rise' signifies a single cumulative ascent, as in the ordinary meaning of the word. It is essentially since its publication that he has clarified the sense in which he used the term. See his 'Preface' to a new edition of *Rise*, dated January 2007, in *Qu Zhengzhihua de Zhengzhi*, Beijing 2008, p. 466, and his interview 'Mit Konfuzius in die Zukunft', *Die Zeit*, 12 June 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *Shishi* indicates the structural conditions of a given historical moment that imply a certain tendency or propensity. The closest Western analogy might be Machiavelli's use of *fortuna*. Like *fortuna*, *shishi* offers historical agents possibilities, both chances and limitations. A famous Chinese proverb reads: *shishi* makes heroes, and heroes make *shishi*. Compared to concepts like progress, *shishi* is much more descriptive and non-teleological.

<sup>6</sup> 'It is because the *Dao* brings renewal day after day that we refer to it as "replete virtue". In its capacity to produce and reproduce (*sheng sheng*) we call it "change": *Yi Jing*, Appended Remarks, § 5.

Thirdly, what is denoted by ‘Chinese’? A core issue for Wang Hui in *Rise* would be the question: ‘what is China?’ The fact that the PRC did not collapse, but saw a robust revival after 1989 surprised not only many Westerners, but also Chinese intellectuals, challenging much conventional wisdom of the period—not least neo-liberal notions popularized in the 1990s. Seeking to understand the historical origins of this vitality, Wang Hui would arrive at a very unconventional answer. For him, ‘China’ underwent profound metamorphoses in different historical periods, in which conceptions of it varied in intention and extent. Rejecting application to China of the binary opposition of empire and nation-state as an analytic dead-end, his aim has been to trace out the mutable dynamism of what was meant by China in history. To understand it, the only solution was to study concrete historical moments. ‘Chinese thought’, therefore, is always taken as a living intellectual endeavour, bred by and responding to ‘the propensity of the time’.

Behind the veil of its formidable title, the emphasis of Wang Hui’s book falls on the vitality and creativity of Chinese thought in its long history. Its aim is to help renew this energy in the contemporary world. In a post-revolutionary society in which there is a widespread loss of the ability to imagine a better alternative, Wang Hui uses history as a spur to the imagination. His break with the linear conception of time springs from his view that this notion has become part of the oppressive machinery of a depoliticized society, alienating people from the dynamism of their past, and depriving them of the necessary resources to invent another future. His sympathy for Confucianism can even give the impression of a cultural conservatism. But, as we shall see, such sympathy is likely to be more methodological than substantive—his own attachments remaining closer to the most radical revolutionary ideas of the twentieth century. The enterprise of *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* is infrastructural—to prepare the necessary intellectual resources and political stimulus for creative thinking about the contemporary world.

## II. A GLANCE INSIDE

Procedurally, Wang Hui’s enquiry moves at a level that recalls not so much Williams, or even Lovejoy, as—allowing for all due differences—Foucault. For his organizing focus is not keywords, as in *Culture and Society*, or unit ideas as in *The Great Chain of Being*, but intellectual frameworks

more analogous to the epistemes of *Words and Things*—‘world-views’ forming integrated constellations in which different key ideas or concepts receive their own positions. Three of these are picked out by Wang Hui. Descending from Zhou times (11th–3rd centuries BC), there prevailed *liyue lun*, the vision of a feudal society (in the most general sense) in which political rule was supposed to be conducted mainly through ‘rituals and music’, as the governing principles of an organic and stable moral order. Here ‘rituals and music’ should not be understood literally. They are the name for institutions with a direct moral purpose, including the systems for fief and tribute, land, education, etc. Since morality was intrinsic to these institutions, the norms of the external order could serve as criteria of ethical evaluation. In the horizon of *liyue lun*, textual study or *jingxue*—scrutiny of a series of Confucian classics—came to be the major branch of learning. This constellation figures in *Rise* as the pre-history of the first volume, which concentrates on how it broke down and what succeeded it, from the Warring States period onwards (475–221 BC).

Under the Qin (221–207 BC), Han (202 BC–9 AD and 25–220 AD) and Tang (618–907 AD) dynasties, the organic moral life of feudal society was weakened by the introduction of more centralized systems of rule, with the installation of prefectures and counties as units of local administration. Political authority increasingly relied on a variety of institutions which were merely functional, without any intrinsic moral meaning. In this situation, a separation opened up between *liyue* (ritual and music) and *zhidu* (institution, system): the order of things no longer directly corresponded to the order of values. Starting with Confucius’s own response to the decline of the traditional order, Wang Hui traces the effort of Han Confucians (especially Dong Zhongshu) to repair the rupture between moral ideals, transmitted from feudal society, and non-feudal reality, by establishing a contrapuntal relationship between heaven and human affairs in which natural phenomena, like the turn of the four seasons, rain, thunder, snow or plague, all had political implications. If this mystical approach could be used to justify the non-feudal institutions of the contemporary world, it also limited the power of the emperor—unknown in feudal times—through an obligation to respect the omens of heaven, interpreted in close relation to the welfare of his subjects. Under the Tang, the attractions of this attempt at a solution faded.<sup>7</sup> When Liu Zongyuan

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<sup>7</sup> Wang Hui’s analysis in this part is quite clear and convincing. But he does not spell out why the mystical approach of Han Confucians lost its appeal in the Tang dynasty. Arguably, the rise of Buddhism was an important factor in this decline.

(773–819), a Tang Confucian, sought to defend the prefecture and county system, he could only appeal to *shishi*, the propensity of the times. But this was rather a weak defence, without a strong moral foundation. This theoretical poverty is the intellectual background for the emergence of a new episteme.

Under the Song (960–1279), in a state now unambiguously based on bureaucratic instruction rather than aristocratic fealty, leading literati, troubled by the gulf between factual arrangements and moral substance, responded by developing the world-view that in the West has come to be called ‘Neo-Confucian’.<sup>8</sup> To restore the organic moral order of the Confucian ideal, these thinkers appealed to a ‘heavenly principle’—*tianli*—as the final criterion of truth, beauty and goodness. *Tianli* is universal and intrinsic in the order and movement of things. But to determine the *telos* of things, it was necessary to study them. Only then could they be restored to their rightful order. So how they should be studied became the key issue of controversy within the ‘world-view of the heavenly principle’, leading to a shift away from text learning towards a new learning centred on ontology-cosmology.

### *Against the Kyoto School*

Wang Hui’s account of Song Neo-Confucianism starts with a criticism of the ‘Tang and Song Transformation’ thesis of the Kyoto School of Japanese historians, according to whom the Song dynasty saw—with the rise of a proto-nation-state, commodity economy and a society no longer bound by status—the birth of modernity in East Asia. Neo-Confucianism accordingly became, in their view, the ideology of a secularized society. Rejecting what he perceives as the implicit teleology of this narrative, Wang Hui argues that by projecting too much of the trajectory of European modernity onto China, the Kyoto School misrepresented Neo-Confucianism as a progressive ideology, and missed the true dynamism of Chinese history. In reality, Neo-Confucian scholars sought to criticize, rather than justify, the ‘modern’ phenomena identified by the Japanese historians in the Song universe. They praised not progress, but the golden age of the

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<sup>8</sup> As a term, ‘Confucianism’ does not exist in Chinese, any more than does ‘Mohammedanism’ in Arabic. The Chinese term is *ruxue*, or ‘study of rituals’, while Song ‘Neo-Confucianism’ is *lixue*, or ‘study of principles’. Contemporary attempts at a Confucian revival, inside and outside the PRC—also often referred to in the West as ‘Neo-Confucian’—are *xin rujia*, or ‘new school of rituals’.

three sage-kings, Yao, Shun and Yu.<sup>9</sup> That did not mean, however, that Neo-Confucianism was a reactionary and oppressive outlook, as many scholars since May Fourth have claimed. Rather, it functioned as a common language for both rulers and the ruled. But while the former sought to appropriate it to legitimize the status quo, the latter used it to politicize many current issues. To offer a modern analogy: historically, both bourgeoisie and proletariat have used the political language of democracy to advance their own interests, the former tending to proceduralize and bureaucratize it, the latter insisting on its substance. It would be a mistake to categorize talk of it as mere ‘false consciousness’, rather than studying how it is actually used and who is using it.

Appealing to a much earlier period of history, Neo-Confucians tried to fill the moral deficit of the contemporary world. To use Ferdinand Tönnies’s terminology, we might say the Neo-Confucians strove to preserve the life of *Gemeinschaft* (community) in a world moving towards *Gesellschaft* (society). But since it was impossible to return to the golden age of old, they were forced to separate moral ideals from the specific political and social settings of the Three Dynasties, and deploy the former, rather than the latter, as the absolute criteria for evaluation. Alternatively, as Wang Hui sees it, the differentiation between *liyue* and *zhidu*, ritual and institution, corresponds to the distinction between fact and value, ‘is’ and ‘ought’, at the core of modern individualist culture. Although Song Confucians regarded this distinction as pathological, they were forced to admit that the traditional harmony between fact and value had collapsed. They had to take the distance between them as a starting point, and sought to overcome it. *Rise* implies, in other words, that Song Confucians offer a mirror of the contemporary world, it too troubled by the chasm between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. In the context of the Song, it is against the background of this distance that *li* (principle), a concept of little significance in classical Confucianism, came to prominence.

Song Neo-Confucians, especially Zhu Xi (1130–1200), thus redressed the intellectual deficit of Tang times, and with the establishment of *lixue* (study of principles) erected a grand theoretical structure. This was an undertaking with strong critical implications. For by invoking

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<sup>9</sup> Yao, Shun and Yu were mythical rulers of pre-historic China. Yu is supposed to have tamed the floods and founded the Xia Dynasty of the pre-Shang period (i.e., before 1700 BC). There is no historical evidence for the dynasty’s existence, although archaeological traces of pre-Shang communities dating back to 3000 BC have been found in central China.

the heavenly principle as a criterion and the Three Dynasties as exemplars, they could propose reforms to a series of institutions, including the land system, the military, the schools, the examination system and local government. However, once such reforms were institutionalized and bureaucratized, *lixue* lost its critical impetus, no longer emphasizing the tension between the heavenly principle and existing institutions, while its injunction to study things—*gewu*—tended to lapse into triviality. It was against this environment that the next wave of Neo-Confucians reacted under the Ming (1368–1644). Inheriting the theoretical structure of *lixue*, Wang Yangming (1472–1529) modified some of its key concepts to develop a doctrine of *xinxue*, or learning of the mind and heart. In his system, things—*wu*—are phenomena no longer of the external world, but of the mind and emotions. Hence *gewu* does not mean dispassionate study of objective realities, but listening to one's own conscience and grasping the heavenly principle through moral practice.

In liberating Neo-Confucianism from any adoration of external things, Wang Yangming's subjective turn retrieved its critical impulse. But for him, the self was still deeply embedded in society, and could only grasp the heavenly principle through ethical conduct. Some of his followers, however, radicalized his teaching. Among these was the iconoclast Li Zhi (1527–1602), who used Wang Yangming's concept of conscience to oppose the external world of rituals and institutions altogether.<sup>10</sup> While Mizoguchi Yuzo holds that Li Zhi can still be regarded as a thinker in the tradition of Neo-Confucianism, Wang Hui believes he displays a strong tendency to go beyond it. Li Zhi's critical attitude to the ethics of any static society, the product of a time of high social fluidity, might have led to a new form of learning: the study of society and economy as a system based upon emotions and desires. Wang Hui terms him 'the left wing' of the Wang School.

The collapse of the Ming dynasty brought the eclipse of 'learning of heart and mind', as the shaking foundations of their political world reminded scholars of the dangers of ultra-subjectivism. Could an appeal

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<sup>10</sup> 'From birth, every man possesses a certain way of acting of his own, and none needs Confucius to supply him with it. If everyone had to wait for instructions from Confucius before acting, no-one could have become a fully fledged human being in the immemorial times before Confucius'; 'the apostles of benevolence use virtues and rites to govern minds, institutions and justice to bind bodies . . . the benevolence of which men are the object is their ruin': *Fenshu* ['A Book for Burning'], I, 16–18.

to conscience generate reliable knowledge, or only fickle opinions? In the late Ming period, literati like Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) and Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) gave more weight to the study of institutions. Huang Zongxi developed the Confucian legend of the ‘Three Dynasties’ into a systematic theory of ideal political and legal institutions, using this institutional paradigm, rather than abstract notions of the ‘heavenly principle’ or ‘conscience’, as the basis of social-moral evaluation. In the face of Manchu conquest, Gu Yanwu made a famous distinction between *wang guo* (the perishing of a state) and *wang tianxia* (the perishing of civilization), urging the preservation of *tianxia* as the paramount task of Chinese intellectuals. This was not simply an expression of Gu’s hostility to the Manchu. The preservation of *tianxia* also points to an institutional paradigm, and careful historical study of the evolving community of *liyue* to locate it. While Huang Zongxi attached his ideal to the Three Dynasties, Gu Yanwu’s approach was more contextual, stressing the way that the intrinsic spirit of the best institutional paradigm could take differing shapes in different historical situations. Admiring the organic moral life of pre-Qin feudal society, he also recognized the value of the current prefecture and county system, calling for a partial recovery of the feudal spirit within it. The work of these thinkers, together with that of the slightly later Yan Yuan (1635–1704), accelerated a revival of *jingxue* or scriptural learning, but in a quite new style, which would eventually lead to historical study proper of classical writings and institutions.

Many scholars, from the early twentieth century onwards, have attributed this philological turn to the repressive impact of Manchu rule, as a safer activity than philosophical speculation. Wang Hui, however, concurring with the historian Yu Yingshi, argues that major trends of Qing scholarship were already at work in the late Ming period. In effect, Manchu rulers appropriated late Ming thinkers’ critique of ultra-subjectivism and proposals for reform for their own ends. So although many early Qing scholars opposed the Manchu regime, they shared much of the same outlook as their rulers. Not that political oppression was insignificant either. Under tightened conditions of censorship, *jingxue* developed into a highly professionalized and depoliticized field of philological study, divested of the original intention of scriptural learning as a search for the ideal institutional paradigm.

This morbid development, billing itself as a revival of Han textualism as opposed to Song ontology, occasions some reflection. Among mid-Qing

scholars, Wang Hui concentrates particularly on Dai Zhen (1724–1777) and Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), neither of them typical of the mainstream. Dai, who would attract much interest in modern times, criticized the Song notion of *li*—principle—as so abstract that it lapsed into a realm of subjective opinions. Where Song and Ming Neo-Confucians had set *li* against *yu* (desire), Dai Zhen maintained that *li*, properly understood, should not be counterposed to *yu*, but was rather intrinsic to it, as desire was natural and necessary. Dai Zhen’s famous denunciation of ‘the principle that kills’—*yili sharen*—was widely circulated during the revolutionary upheavals of the twentieth century as a protest against feudal autocracy. Contextualizing it, however, Wang Hui argues that the direct target of Dai Zhen’s critique was not the whole social and political system of his time, but local communities dominated by the patriarchal clan system that inflicted arbitrary punishments for infractions of *li* without any legal authority. Contrary to later interpretations, his critique echoed the Qing court’s drive to tighten its jurisdiction over local and traditional self-governing society. At the same time, while he criticized Song learning for its abstraction, Dai was also very dissatisfied with the depoliticized scriptural studies of his time, and drew in part on Song thought to restate the moral-political purpose of text learning, earning him some counterpunches from more orthodox *jingxue* scholars.

In the next generation Zhang Xuecheng saw the dilemma involved in Dai Zhen’s fight on two fronts. Inheriting Dai’s discontent with both Song and Han traditions, he tried a radically new approach. For him, both the Song preoccupation with onto-cosmology and Han return to the ancient letter of Confucian texts ignored the living practice embodied in concrete institutional structures. Classical texts therefore had to be understood as the trace of once-living practices, as expressed in his striking slogan *liu jing jie shi*—‘All the Six Classics are History’. This was an effort to save Confucianism from both the subjectivism of Song *lixue* and the morbid objectivism of mid-Qing *jingxue*. For Wang Hui, both Dai and Zhang sought to reinvigorate Confucian thought in a depoliticized intellectual climate.

### *Qing Confucianism*

The second volume of *Rise* covers the period from mid to late Qing rule under the rubric of *Empire and State*. Its basic theme is the adjustment of ‘New Text Learning’—*jin wen jingxue*—to the changing structures of

imperial power under the Manchu. Since Han times there had existed rival versions of the Confucian classics, whose originals had been burned under the Qin Legalism of the First Emperor (221–210 BC). After his death, those texts retrieved from memory were written down in contemporary Han script. But before long, versions in pre-Qin script were rediscovered, one after another. These became the ‘old text’ variants, while those in Han script were called ‘new text’. Dispute centred on which were the more authentic.<sup>11</sup> Old Text learning tended to value philological accuracy and emphasize the historical evolution of the whole cultural-political tradition descending from the classics; New Text learning, especially the Gongyang school, projected Confucius as a great lawgiver, and sought esoteric intentions in the classics. Under the Former Han, scholars of the New Text school, in particular Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BC), supplied a series of new ideas for reforms to consolidate Han Wudi’s unified empire.

Similarly, although Old Text learning was more prevalent in early and mid Qing, New Text learning came to play a significant role in the consolidation of Qing power. Unlike the Han, the Manchu were an ethnic minority, and their empire eventually covered a diverse range of peoples with different languages and cultures. The Qing court consequently ruled in a highly flexible fashion, adjusting its forms of domination to different groups of subjects, and of interaction to other countries. It mixed feudal hierarchy with prefecture and county administration, and at the limit its tribute system could even accommodate equal treaty relationships with another state: Tsarist Russia.

For Wang Hui, this ‘institutional pluralism’ undoes any binary opposition between ‘empire’ and ‘nation-state’. It was here that the New Text learning helped to legitimize Qing rule, by relativizing the traditional distinctions between *yi* and *xia*—Barbarian and Chinese—and *nei* and

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<sup>11</sup> Under the Han the ‘Five Classics’ acquired sacred status once they were officially attributed to Confucius. In historical reality, as a leading modern authority notes, ‘no recorded tradition prior to 100 BC identifies Confucius as author, editor or compiler of this collection’; indeed, ‘most probably Confucius did not compose any texts at all’: Michael Nylan, *The Five ‘Confucian’ Classics*, New Haven 2001, pp. 6, 18. The fierce controversies that divided New Text from Old Text scholars over which versions were genuine and which were forgeries were thus, by contemporary criteria, tilting at philological windmills—though, of course, much like disputes over the Pentateuch in the West, they were no less intellectually and politically crucial in the development of *ruxue* for that.

*wai*—internal and external—and minimizing difference of blood origins, to consolidate the political order of the Manchu. In this process, New Text learning redefined ‘China’ as a boundless community, delimited not by territory or ethnicity but by a set of ritual practices. To show this process at work, Wang Hui draws on the academic works and letters to the throne of two Qing scholar-ministers, Zhuang Cunyu (1719–1788) and Liu Fenglu (1776–1829), both of Han origin, and familiar with the cultural and political pluralism of the Qing. In their hands, New Text learning was not only a resource to legitimize an alien dynasty, but also had critical implications, since the ideal of a ritual China required a certain degree of equality among ethnic groups, incompatible with Manchu oppression of them.

Wang Hui notes that it was a recurrent phenomenon for dynasties established by ethnic minorities to use New Text learning to support their legitimacy as rulers of China. Many literati officials serving the Jurchens in their rivalry (1115–1234) with the Song had employed it in this way, as did the Mongols of the later Yuan dynasty (1271–1368); both regimes downplaying differences of blood origin and instead focusing on ritual practices as the insignia of dynastic legitimacy. Official appropriation of New Text learning under the early Qing was thus not a totally new phenomenon. The novelty of Manchu rule lay in its success in combining three traditions: the heritage of their own Jurchen descent with the legacies of the Mongol Khans and of the Ming dynasty—a mixture systematized in the theory of *tong santong* (integration of three traditions), a core doctrine of New Text learning in this period. Wang Hui’s analysis of the successive appropriations of New Text ideas that culminated with the Qing dynasty is a major contribution to scholarship, which remains unsurpassed in its field.

While Zhuang Cunyu and Liu Fenglu were concerned with relations between Han and Manchu, in the next generation the New Text learning of Gong Zizhen (1792–1841) and Wei Yuan (1794–1857) turned towards the study of the relationship between the Qing realm and its international environment, as pressure on China grew from the Russian empire and European colonial expansion. As the notion of a boundless order under the Manchu ceased to be sustainable, scholars had to modify their tenets to meet the new challenges. Once used to describe relations between different peoples within the empire, *yi* and *xia*, *nei* and *wai* were now employed to depict relations between the Qing and other empires or nation-states. Distinctions that had formerly been very flexible gradually

fell into a modern logic of nationalism. Meanwhile, the crises on the Qing frontiers drove them to propose reform of domestic relations that, in response to external pressures, tended to put an increasing premium on internal homogeneity. Step by step, New Text learning became interwoven with the world of sovereign states, nationalism and international public law. Many late Qing Confucian scholars—ironically, assisted in part by the American missionary William Martin’s work on ‘ancient Chinese public law’—started to reinterpret the ancient texts to displace traditional conceptions of a flexible tribute system in favour of a more homogeneous and rigorous order of sovereign states.

### *Thinkers of the general principle*

By the late nineteenth century, the conflict between China and the West was not simply a military or political collision. It was also the clash of two world images. Once the self-image of the Manchu dynasty as a boundless political order had become defunct, late Qing scholars reoriented New Text learning toward the building of a nation-state; yet at the same time, they could not accept the conclusion that Confucianism was losing universal validity and lapsing into a kind of ‘local knowledge’. For Wang Hui, the late Qing reformist Kang Youwei (1858–1927) was the last *jingxue* scholar who perfectly embodied this duality. The particularly bold twist he gave to New Text learning made an explicit appeal for reforms in the direction of the nation-state, drawing an analogy between the Warring States period and the contemporary world. At the same time, he proposed to make Confucianism into a state religion, to confer a common cultural identity on the loosely connected Qing empire, and promoted the ideal of a constitutional monarchy within it. So too he conjured up a vision of world governance according to Confucian values. However fruitless it would be in a world dominated by European powers, for Wang Hui this ‘Confucian universalism’ remains valuable for its critical implications.

The third volume of *Rise* moves to three theoretical programmes also developed during the last years of Qing rule to reconstruct the modern world and China, offered by Yan Fu (1854–1921), Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Zhang Taiyan (1869–1936). In their writings, the world-view of the general principle ripens. Unlike Kang Youwei, none of these thinkers worked within the framework of *jingxue*, new or old. Each sought rather to combine resources from traditional—but not necessarily

Confucian—Chinese thought with Western influences, to respond to the problems confronting them. For Yan Fu, these resources were to be Song *lixue*, the geomancy of the *Yi Jing* ('The Book of Changes', dating back to Zhou times) and Western positivism; for Liang Qichao, Wang Yangming's *xinxue*, New Text learning and German idealism; for Zhang Taiyan, Daoism and Yogācāra Buddhism.

Common to all three, however, was the horizon of a new principle, whether like Yan and Liang they adopted it, or like Zhang opposed it. This was the emergence of *gongli*—'the general principle'—as a modern substitute for *tianli*—'the heavenly principle'—of old. The constellation of the general principle arises in a world in which modern science is gradually establishing its hegemony. The break it represented lay in three decisive changes. Firstly, the future, rather than the past, becomes the vanishing-point of moral and political realization. Secondly, time is now conceived as a linear, progressive continuum, whereas according to the heavenly principle, time was typically imagined as discontinuous or cyclical, its 'propensity' varying according to circumstances. Thirdly, the world-view of the 'general principle' is based upon atomic 'facts', to which ethics and politics must be formatted, dividing fact and value in just the way that the 'heavenly principle' sought to avoid. But although the constellations were so contrasted in these respects, path dependence persisted. For they shared the same notion of *li* as a univocal principle, covering all the realms of life. The holism of the former prepared the terrain for the holism of the latter.

In the late Qing era, Yan Fu was famous for his translations of Adam Smith, Thomas Huxley and John Stuart Mill. For Wang Hui, his greatest achievement lay in his introduction of a positivistic view of the world and of a cosmic order, and his imbrication of this order into the groundwork of a sociology. From his intellectual background in studies of the *Yi Jing* and Song learning, Yan Fu understood the cosmos from a monist perspective. Therefore he disagreed with Huxley's contention that human society did not follow the same law of evolution as the natural world. Nor could he accept Spencer's belief that evolution was linear, either. But his immersion in the *Yi Jing* provided him with resources to reconcile the ideas of the two thinkers. For Yan Fu, the laws of evolution, just like the way of change in the *Yi Jing*, are universal, permeating not only the natural world, but human society too. Nor were the natural process in evolution or cyclical movements of nature in the *Yi Jing* amoral.

On the contrary, the evolution of the universe implicitly pointed towards the moral ideal of *gong* (what is public) as opposed to *si* (what is private, or monopolized). This cosmology was further reflected in a sociology centred on *qun* (group, society). His society is a construct based upon a division of labour, a classification of knowledge, and a collective desire for national wealth and power. It can be read as a sharp critique of traditional Chinese society, based on ties of blood and familial lineage. In accordance with his vision of a new society, Yan Fu planned a new order of knowledge based on *qunxue*—the study of groups, or sociology.

In a well-known reading, the historian Benjamin Schwartz argued that Yan Fu had misunderstood critical features of the Western thought for whose introduction into China he was so largely responsible.<sup>12</sup> In particular, in highlighting too exclusively the collective power of the West, Yan Fu had downplayed the significance of individuality, as a fundamental value, in thinkers like Mill. Wang Hui notes the same pattern, but does not take it as a weakness in Yan Fu's thought. For in the late Qing era, the overwhelming problem for China was not the relationship between state and society, but the survival of the country in competition with the West. Under external pressure, both state and society had to be reconstructed, and it was to this task that Yan Fu's reception of Western thought was directed. His apparent 'misunderstanding' had its own rationale, enabling him to see something that Western thinkers themselves had forgotten, or failed to grasp.

Where Yan Fu's world-view was monistic, Liang Qichao recognized that there was a difference between natural science and the moral world, but sought to reconcile them. The unity of Liang's protean intellectual life is a familiar problem for scholars in modern Chinese intellectual history. In a reading of his career as influential as Schwartz's interpretation of Yan Fu, Joseph Levenson argued that Liang's emotional attachment to his cultural tradition was the only force bridging his various changes of outlook and position.<sup>13</sup> Strongly disagreeing, Wang Hui maintains that there was a methodological consistency in Liang: throughout his life, he tried to keep a balance between science and religion/morality. On the one hand, science made it possible to distinguish between religion

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West*, Cambridge, MA 1964.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Levenson, *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China*, Cambridge, MA 1953.

and superstition, public reason and private opinion; on the other, science could not cancel free will, and its uses needed to be governed by moral purposes.

In his early period (1896–1901), when he was Kang Youwei's disciple, Liang wrote within the framework of Kang's theory of the 'three stages' of human development—originary chaos, intermediate well-being and ultimate 'great harmony'. Still taking the legendary Three Dynasties as exemplars, Liang proposed a series of reforms centred on the spirit of *qun* and *gong*, the former pointing towards the latter. In his middle period (1902–1917), Liang shook off the theory of the three stages, adopting an increasingly Western vocabulary. Noticing the difference between empiricism and idealism in Europe, he sought to grasp it by analogy to Chinese thought, using Zhu Xi to understand Bacon, Mencius to understand Descartes, and Wang Yangming to understand Kant, as a synthesis of the two kinds of thinking. Kant's distinction between pure reason and practical reason helped Liang think through the relationship between science and religion/morality, especially the moral use of science. In this phase, Liang conceived the evolution of human society as progress towards a higher moral plane, entailing the control of natural instincts. The notion of *qun*, which implies sociality, still lay at the centre of his intellectual work, including his theory of the 'new citizen'. In a final period (1918–1929), Liang seemed to return to the position of a cultural conservative. He now clearly saw the possibility of conflicts between object and subject, science and free will, and found in Confucianism a path of reconciliation between them. In this phase his philosophical hero in the West was William James, who had reconciled these oppositions in his pragmatism. Less a sociological programme along Yan Fu's lines, Liang's ideal of modernity became—Wang Hui hints—a vision of harmonious humanity not too different from the 'rituals and music' of the Three Dynasties.

Zhang Taiyan, the last of the trio Wang Hui analyses in this volume, was the most heterodox and distinctive of these thinkers, and is the inspiration for the second part of its title, *General Principles and Anti-General Principles*, since he was resolutely hostile to notions such as *qun* and *gongli*. Instead he drew on Old Text learning, Kant and Schopenhauer via Japanese translation, Yogācāra Buddhism and the Daoism of Zhuangzi, in a radical synthesis of his own. For Zhang Taiyan, individuals are born in a world without any pre-ordained *telos*. Any kind of teleology or

determinism, in fact, is incompatible with individual autonomy. Ideas like ‘materialism’, ‘evolution’ and ‘nature’ do not correspond to real entities, but are mere names constructed by the human mind, which can be easily appropriated to advance private interests. Zhang attacked virtually all the mainstream reform proposals of his times: representative political systems, merchant associations, intellectual societies, political parties, gentry-village communities. For him, all such organizations and institutions were oppressive and ephemeral.

But Zhang’s outlook was in no sense a Chinese version of Western liberalism or individualism. The self was truer than collectivities, but it still could not be regarded as the true substance. Wang Hui points out Zhang’s indebtedness to Yogācāra Buddhism, in which *Ālaya* (‘storehouse consciousness’) sees all things in the world, including the individual, as empty of independent existence; and to Zhuangzi’s philosophy, which proposes absolute equality among all beings, animate and inanimate alike. True egalitarianism lies in recognition of the singularity of things beyond the order of names. In this style, Zhang Taiyan transcended the anthropocentrism of the modern world. He disagreed radically with Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, but in his very negations of the general principle, also contributed to the constellation in which it predominated.

### *Mr Science*

The fourth volume of *Rise* traces the subsequent emergence of a ‘community of scientific discourse’ into the Republican period. It covers the establishment (from 1902) of science as an academic discipline in the late Qing; the development (from 1917) of a scientific discourse with some ‘family resemblances’ to the world-view of *tianli*; the debates (from 1915) over Oriental culture and Occidental culture; and the clash (as of 1923) between ‘metaphysical’ and ‘scientific’ outlooks on life.<sup>14</sup> For Wang Hui, the May Fourth period (1917–23) marked the high tide of the ‘general principle’, as thinkers like Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), Hu Shi (1891–1962) and Wu Zhihui (1865–1953) tried to establish the authority of science over every domain of life, including politics and morality—Chen Duxiu embracing positivism and materialism, Hu Shi promoting

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<sup>14</sup> The principal protagonist of the debate over Oriental and Occidental cultures was Liang Shuming (1893–1988); the leading figures in the dispute between scientific and metaphysical world-views were Zhang Junmai (1887–1968) and Ding Wenjiang (1887–1936).

pragmatism and humanism, and Wu Zhihui advocating the practice of science in everyday life. In Wang Hui's treatment of these figures, emphasis falls on the continuities of their thought with the past rather than breaks with it. Though critics of the world-view of the 'heavenly principle', they inherited its holistic impulse and much else from it too. Chen Duxiu's conception of science starts to look like the Neo-Confucian slogan *gewu zhizhi* (study things to gain knowledge); Hu Shi, wanting to rescue epistemology from Neo-Confucianism, appeals to *xinxue* (the learning of mind-heart) to strengthen it, and draws widely from Qing critics of Song *lixue* like Gu Yanwu, Yan Yuan and Dai Zhen; Wu Zhihui vehemently attacks Neo-Confucianism, but the structure of his new world-view much resembles that of the old.

By the end of the 1920s, however, through a series of campaigns and debates, the world-view of the 'general principle' dissolved into different relatively autonomous realms, each with their own criterion of validity. Citing Habermas's claim that the separation of the three realms of communicative action—cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive—is the basic condition of cultural modernity, Wang Hui suggests that we should not take these debates at face value as science versus morality, science versus religion, science versus aesthetics, and so on, but rather as steps towards this contemporary condition. The difference between the historical trajectories of China and the West would be this. In the West, religion and metaphysics dissolved into three autonomous realms, whereas in China the 'general principle' was the womb that gave birth to them.

After reviewing the overall arguments of *Rise*, Wang Hui ends his work with some concluding reflections on the theme of 'scientism' in the intellectual history of modern China, with a critique of the distinction between 'science' and 'scientism' as advanced by neo-liberal thinkers, above all Hayek. According to Hayek, if science transgresses its legitimate boundaries, it becomes scientism, and this was the fatal conceit of a socialism which believed it could plan economy and society scientifically. To bid farewell to socialism was therefore to return to the true scientific spirit of respect for the 'spontaneous order' of a market economy that cannot be planned. This thesis was well received in China during the 1990s. In Wang Hui's eyes, it is of no help in understanding China's social transformation since the late Qing. Hayek's distinction implies that a scientistic movement is irrelevant to the community of

science, and that the latter is irrelevant to the social and political practice of the society at large. But these are mistaken assumptions. What the narrative of *Rise* has shown is that the community of epistemological discourse played a key role in reshaping the political and social relations of the whole society. Therefore the distinction between ‘science’ and ‘scientism’ is an artificial one. Lacking any social theory of science, neo-liberals are incapable of analysing the actual dynamics of the rise of socialism in China, reducing it merely to the outcome of a wrong epistemology. Drawing on Braudel’s and Polanyi’s accounts of the development of capitalism, Wang Hui puts a series of binary oppositions dear to neo-liberalism—state/society, market/plan, nature/culture—to a historical test, and concludes that they confuse rather than advance study of the social dynamics of capitalism and of the modern world.

The reason why this concluding critique of neo-liberal theory is crucial to Wang Hui’s project should be clear. If Hayek were right, Wang Hui’s enterprise would be futile, for both the ‘heavenly principle’ and the ‘general principle’ are holistic world-views which could easily be interpreted as paving the ‘road to serfdom’. Not, of course, that *Rise* is a response to Hayek, who is but one of many theoretical adversaries with whom Wang Hui deals. Nor does the current ebb of the neo-liberal tide in any way weaken the contemporary significance of his undertaking. Wang Hui ends his great work by calling for careful study of the inner dynamism of modernity, embodied in both socialism and capitalism:

We have to think seriously about the historical premises shared by capitalism and socialism—the political form of the nation-state, the commitment to progress, the promise of modernization, the historical mission of nationalism, the prospect of a free and equal society, and the modernist attitude linking the meaning of one’s own struggle and existence to the present as the transition to a future prospect. It is reflection on these problems that will bring us to the various historical conditions which gave rise to modern thought, and to the remoter past, because the history that modernity arrogantly refuses contains possibilities and revelations capable of overcoming the crisis of modernity.

### III. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

It can safely be said that nothing comparable to Wang Hui’s work has appeared in China since the late Qing–early Republican period. Yet the sheer scale of its intellectual ambition and sweep of scholarship have so

far not been met by much critical discussion. Given the book's range, this is not entirely surprising: full engagement with it is a tall order for any reader. But a number of reflections are possible, some more tentative than others. In a work of this nature, a certain unevenness is probably inevitable, and what criticisms there have been of *Rise* have been concerned with this. Some of the book's short-cuts or omissions can be noted here.

Compared to his study of Song *lixue*, Wang Hui's treatment of *xinxue* and its intellectual descendents in Ming times seems cursory. Only about thirty pages are devoted to the ideas of Wang Yangming and his followers, which is very disproportionate to the significance of 'heart and mind learning' in the history of Neo-Confucianism. The most important weakness of this material is that Wang Hui is so eager to prove that *xinxue* is still within the conceptual horizon of *tianli* that he makes little effort to contextualize this school of thought; whereas he discusses Song Confucian reform agendas in detail, his account of Ming thought has few live political scenarios, tending to reduce *xinxue* to a simple link in an intellectual chain, at the expense of his own goal of discovering Chinese resources for an alternate modernity. There is also one important figure missing in Wang Hui's narrative: Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692), the Confucian scholar who was a major influence on anti-Manchu intellectual currents in the late Qing era, but who is mentioned in passing only twice, without his thought ever being spelt out.<sup>15</sup> In mitigation, it should be said that these lacunae in part reflect the intellectual condition of the field: there is a very strong and original literature on the rise of Neo-Confucianism, but studies on the vicissitudes of intellectual schools after the Song display more scattered threads and tones.

Another imbalance in Wang Hui's narrative is the emphasis he puts on the role of New Text learning in the making of modern China, without any comparable attention to the later implications of Old Text learning. Zhang Taiyan was the most important representative of Old Text learning in the late Qing era, which he deployed in the service of his anti-Manchu nationalism, in opposition to Kang Youwei's Manchu loyalism, based on

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<sup>15</sup> There could be a number of reasons for his omission. More or less a hermit, Wang Fuzhi was not much known in his own time, and had little influence on the development of Confucian thought before the late Qing era, when he was rediscovered and appropriated as a source of anti-Manchu revolutionary action. Also, epistemologically he was not as heterodox as Huang Zongxi or Gu Yanwu, remaining a Neo-Confucian of onto-cosmological outlook.

New Text learning. But Wang Hui mentions neither Zhang's background in Old Text learning in his chapter on Zhang, nor the debate between Kang and Zhang in his chapter on Kang Youwei, leaving readers with the impression that Old Text learning had its heyday in the mid-Qing era, and had become politically irrelevant by late Qing times.

What does this imbalance imply? I think it is a token of the weakness of his narrative form rather than the weakness of his research. As a scholar, Wang Hui knows the debates between New Text learning and Old Text learning in the late Qing era perfectly well. But the way he has composed his work limits its intellectual expression at this point. *Rise* is primarily a collection of studies of relevant topics, linked by some internal threads. Many of its chapters were, or could have been, published as independent articles. They are integrated into one book, but do not follow the same rules of integration. If the first volume follows a roughly chronological trajectory, and the second runs from the early Qing era to Kang Youwei, the third covers three thinkers of the late Qing horizontally, as locally conceived projects of modernity. Logically, Kang Youwei could have been included in this part. That he is not is only because he writes too much on the empire-state theme and so can help consolidate the arguments of the second volume. Finally, the fourth volume has a compound structure, combining intellectual movements and debates with special studies of individual participants. The effect of this arrangement is a treatment of the late Qing era—a time of ferocious engagement among different schools, traditional or Westernizing, Confucian or non-Confucian, of vivid intellectual richness—that is not proportional to its actual significance in Wang Hui's project.

A more general question is raised, as noted above, by the relationship between Wang Hui's two threads of thought—science and empire/nation-state—in the structure of *Rise*. The second was a new thread, complicating his original project, which when joined to the first posed the problem of their integration, formal and substantial. In his Prologue, Wang Hui explains their relationship: the second should be seen as a historical concretization of the first. For ideas like *tianli* and *gongli* were not simply concerned with the foundations of knowledge; they were also the basis of moral-political authority and identity. Discussion of such authority and identity, organized around concepts of 'China' that escaped definition by either empire or nation-state, was thus an indispensable part of Wang Hui's study of successive epistemes. Or to put

it more concretely: with its holistic impulse, Confucianism tended to integrate the acquisition of knowledge, moral practice and political rule into the same package. While its epistemology always had moral and political implications, changes in moral and political practice also tended to call forth an epistemological change. Even after the decline of Confucianism, this holistic impulse survived in the reform period of the late Qing, continuing to hold knowledge, morality and politics together until the separation of realms became a material reality in the twentieth century. This explanation carries conviction, whatever further questions arise. Formally, however, an imbalance remains between the two themes of the book, perhaps in part due to the order in which the four volumes were written. One can imagine that, had Wang Hui thoroughly revised the last two, essentially written before the first two, the result could have been a more integrated composition, offering a more rounded portrait of the debates on the future of China between Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Zhang Taiyan and their contemporaries, along with other topics.<sup>16</sup>

### *Absent schools*

A more fundamental question, however, is posed by the last word in the title of *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*. What kind of thought is at issue in the four volumes? Clearly, from the Song to the early Republic, the answer is Confucianism, in all its various schools and sequels. The immediate reason why Wang Hui starts with the Song comes from his engagement with the Kyoto School's discussion of Chinese modernity. But this polemical motive is not a reasoned justification. The reader is entitled to ask: why does the narrative not begin much earlier, if not in the Spring and Autumn, then in the Warring States period, 5th–3rd centuries BC? About the time of the May Fourth movement, Max Weber was arguing that at this stage pre-Qin China had exhibited a kind of political rationality comparable to that of early modern Europe. Wang Hui's construction is certainly anti-Weberian: post-Qin China was very dynamic, manifesting a different kind of rationality, unknown to Weber. While appreciating this counter-argument, one also notices that Wang Hui does not respond substantively to Weber's judgement of the Warring States period, although it is unlikely that as a scholar sensitive to the specificity of historical context, he would completely agree with his description of it.

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<sup>16</sup> Kang's draft constitution for the republic of 1913, in which he stipulated that Buddhism should be the state religion of Mongolia and Tibet, and Confucianism in the Han zone, would be an important document in considering these.

Even conceding Weber's claim that its political rationality was based on competition, Wang Hui would no doubt argue that its mechanisms and prospects were intrinsically different from the Western rationality that was Weber's standard. What it would be difficult for him to contest, however, is that the Warring States period contained the seeds of a Chinese modernity. Why, then, is it excluded from the horizon of his book? Since he has explained that the 'rise' of modern Chinese thought is not to be understood in the sense of any progressive chronology, but as a recurrence, it does not seem open to him to omit it merely on grounds of it lying chronologically too far back.

An analogy may help to clarify the significance of the resultant foreshortening of perspectives. The Warring States saw lively contention between a 'Hundred Schools of Thought', not least Daoism, Mohism and Legalism, in an intellectual flowering generally held to be among the most, if not *the* most, creative epochs in Chinese philosophical and political thought, comparable to—and largely preceding—classical Antiquity in the West. By contemporary criteria, much of this thought—in their different ways Zhuangzi, Xunzi, Mozi, Sunzi, Hanfeizi—was distinctively more 'modern' than the codified Confucianism of later periods, just as the thought-world of Democritus, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Seneca is closer to a modern outlook than that of the Church Fathers or St Ignatius. A study of the rise—understood in the sense of *shengsheng*—of modern Western thought that ignored the whole of the classical world and its subsequent rediscovery, confining itself to mediaeval Christianity and its sequels, would look odd. The parallel is not, of course, an exact one, but those who have been deeply impressed by the appropriation by Chinese intellectuals of non-Confucian schools of thought to criticize the Confucian tradition since the late Qing may be surprised by their seeming marginalization in Wang Hui's narrative, which does not have a single independent chapter on the modern implications of non-Confucian schools.

In a sense, however, this absence follows from his exclusion of the Warring States period from the focus of his project. Since his history starts from the Song, and earlier periods are touched on mainly as steps toward this starting-point, non-Confucian schools certainly cannot occupy a conspicuous position, since from the Song onwards, they were banished not only from the canon of consecrated classics—that was so from Han times onwards—but, without ever quite disappearing from sight, were more generally buried under the weight of a newly systematized *lixue*. This is

not to say that Wang Hui is unaware of the debts many of the thinkers he discusses owed to intellectual resources that were not Confucian. On the contrary, he frequently mentions them: Neo-Confucianism drew from Buddhism; Dai Zhen's analysis of desire and law had a tint of Legalism; Kang Youwei was deeply influenced by Buddhism, Zhang Taiyan by both Buddhism and Daoism; Liang Qichao sought to appropriate Mohism in his prescriptions for the new citizen. But such references are scattered across different chapters of the book, without consolidation.

This may be due to an intentional choice. Previous historiography in the PRC, especially the mainstream Marxist tradition, tended to downplay Confucianism as a reactionary ideology of rule, inimical to the 'buds of capitalism' in China, and to praise Legalist notions of a linear temporality as progressive. Since Wang Hui rejects linear conceptions of time, he could not accept the teleological concept of 'buds of capitalism' any more than the blunt categorization of Confucianism as reactionary. He portrays it as a tradition open to all kinds of intellectual sources, to which as a hegemonic ideology it was forced to respond by the requirements of political and social practice. Confucianism could absorb and consolidate the prefecture and county system pioneered by Legalism; imitate Buddhist forms of cosmology-ontology; incorporate Mohist motifs into its picture of 'great harmony'—even develop, in Kang Youwei, a utopia that borrowed from a socialist in the West like Bellamy.

These are important insights. But is a purely 'internalizing' approach enough to address the relation between non-Confucian schools and the possible resources for an alternative modernity? Wang Hui's reservations about any conception of temporality as linear progress are understandable, and might be one of the reasons for his turning away from the Warring States period. The boldest minds of the Legalist tradition were certainly confident that material and cultural advances were demonstrable in human development, and should be sought in the future.<sup>17</sup> But in

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<sup>17</sup> In Hanfeizi's famous parable: 'There was a farmer of Song who tilled a field in which there stood the stump of a tree. One day a hare, racing across the field, bumped into the stump, broke its neck and died. Thereupon the farmer laid aside his plough and watched the stump, hoping he would get another hare the same way. But he got no more hares and instead became the laughing stock of Song. Those who think they can take the ways of ancient kings and use them to govern the people of today are doing the same': Hanfeizi, 19, §49, 'The Five Termites'. Heading the list of termites were scholars 'who adore the ways of early kings, affecting benevolence and righteousness'.

enclosing the entire rise of modern Chinese thought within a Confucian encasement, he may have understated the opposite burden: the fixation of the whole tradition of *lixue* on the mythology of the Three Dynasties, the fetishization of an imaginary past. Most cultures have had legends of a Golden Age. But it might be asked how many have embedded them, institutionally and intellectually, with the same rigidity and longevity as Confucianism? Of its various resources for a different modernity, it requires much more theoretical work to say this was one.

### *Implications*

A related question is posed by these four volumes. The organizing focus of *Rise* is epistemological—a reconstruction of the successive systems of knowledge, or belief, that dominated China from the Song to the early Republic. But as Wang Hui emphasizes, in the Confucian constellation the cognitive was inseparable from the ethical or political—hence the interweaving of the two threads of his research. But these are not of equal length. The dominant interest of the book remains epistemological, and not just in the formal distribution of the volumes. More puzzling is the extent to which the social or political interventions proper of its *dramatis personae* are given so little salience. This is true already of the Ming scholars Huang Zongxi or Li Zhi, whose outspoken attacks on political autocracy and social conformity are scarcely mentioned, while Dai Zhen's bitter denunciation of *li* dwindles to little more than a critique of clan obstruction of the central state.<sup>18</sup> Most unexpectedly of all, not only the late Qing landscape but even the May Fourth period itself are treated in volumes three and four as if their leading figures divided largely over questions of science. The burning political debates over monarchy and republic, reform and revolution, Han and Manchu, capitalism and socialism into which Kang, Liang, Zhang, Chen, Hu, Wu and others threw themselves find little place in the story. It is an enigma why the narrative should end in such an apparently depoliticized way.

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<sup>18</sup> 'The high and mighty use *li* [moral principles] to blame the lowly. The old use *li* to blame the young. The exalted use *li* to blame the downtrodden. Even if they are mistaken, those in control call what they have done proper. If the lowly, the young or the downtrodden use *li* to resist, even if they are right they are labelled rebels . . . For those uncountable throngs of people, their only crime is their lowly position. When someone dies under the law, there are those who pity them. Who pities those who die under the sway of *li*?' See Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology*, Cambridge, MA 1984, p. 18.

That this is certainly not because Wang Hui was moving away from politics becomes clear from the hundred-page Prologue that he wrote after completing it, which takes up the themes of *Empire and State* in a series of directly contemporary political reflections. Yet these too pose an underlying question that readers of *Rise* may fairly ask: what is the final upshot of its retracing of the *shengsheng* of modern Chinese thought—the yield of its two threads of enquiry—for the present? On the plane of epistemology, it would seem that its principal lesson is the creativity of a native holism, whose value continues to be an admonition for us today. The difficulty with such a conclusion is that, as Wang Hui shows, from the holism of *tianli* came that of *gongli*, and from the holism of *gongli* the dissolution of any constellation that could still integrate truth, morality and beauty into a single value-order. From the polytheism of Weber's warring gods of modernity, or even its neutered version in Habermas's various departments of communicative action, Wang Hui does not suggest there is any way back. Even if the path by which we have arrived at it has differed historically in China, the end-point appears to be much the same.

It is perhaps this that may explain the twist taken by the other thread of *Rise*—its political filament. For if the epistemological integrity of *lixue* now lies irrevocably out of reach, the revolutions of the twentieth century have demolished all its practical institutions—save one. The territorial order assembled by the Qing, neither classical empire nor conventional nation-state, continues to be the framework of the People's Republic today. There, at least, an alternative to a modular Western modernity is a tangible, continuous inheritance from the past. Here would seem to lie the most logical explanation of the solitary prominence of the theme of empire and state in the political landscape of Wang Hui's reconstruction of the past, from which the volcanic debates of the early twentieth century have been marginalized, as if they were a lesser contribution to the rise of modern Chinese thought; transient ideals in contrast to a perdurable reality.

In this respect, besides others already noted, *Rise* differs from its earlier counterparts in the Third World, and even in one case the First. Figures like Al-Afghani or Savarkar or Mariátegui sought to recover cultural resources of the past to mobilize popular forces for an anti-colonial or social-revolutionary mass movement. In Britain, Raymond Williams had a comparably radical agenda for the labour movement of an advanced

capitalist country, which becomes both the analytic and political endpoint of the tradition retraced in *Culture and Society*. To all appearances, the four volumes of *Rise* lack any such mobilizing dimension. Even the late Qing intellectuals, once their political passions become little more than parentheses, feature as if they were only concerned with legitimacy, rather than above all with mobilization. If Wang Hui's writing were indeed limited to this horizon, it would be closer to the quietist work of contemporary Iranian intellectuals, who probe established Islamic traditions of jurisprudence to find a new basis on which to ground collective ethics and political reform.

This is, of course, far from the case. To understand why that is so, we need to recall that his original plan was to cover both watchwords of the May Fourth movement—'science' and 'democracy'. *Rise* was always conceived as the first stage in a longer-term project. The 'propensity of the time' after 1989 defined his research agenda: with all possibility of political mobilization cancelled, Wang Hui had to start from something seemingly distant from contemporary politics to accumulate potential energy for recharging critical thought. But as that propensity changes, the political dimension of his intellectual enterprise is bound to become more and more salient.

### *Countering bureaucratization*

It is enough to consider his most important writing since to see how consistently he has pursued his original project. The title of 'Depoliticized Politics: From East to West', which appeared in 2006,<sup>19</sup> recalls the paradox of his earlier 'modernity against modernity', if this time in negative rather than positive mode. The noun of the formula refers to the everyday understanding of politics as the arena of power and interest, while the adjective implies a normative concept of 'the political', as active subjectivity and human agency in the public sphere. To depoliticize is to deprive the political subject of the opportunity of intervention in that public space. Wang Hui argues that this has been a common process at work in the party politics of West and East alike. When parties still actively represented their popular constituents, they were political. But since the 1970s, in both East and West they have gradually become a part of the state apparatus, and their capacity for genuine politics has degenerated.

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<sup>19</sup> See NLR 41, September–October 2006, pp. 29–45; now in Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution*, London and New York 2010, pp. 3–18.

In China, the vitality of the Communist Party came from its persistent efforts to politicize itself against the trend of bureaucratization, before that trend gained the upper hand, undermining its political function.

What is the connexion between the concept of depoliticized politics and Wang Hui's earlier work? A hypothesis might be this. *Rise* sketches out a political cycle for intellectual invention. Initially, a system of thought may fit society well, but once it becomes institutionalized, it may be unable to keep up with social changes; whereupon new thoughts arise to challenge the rigid institutional structure of the time and open up a space for innovation; if reform is successful, the new body of thought may become official doctrine, and a new round of movement begins. In the history of Confucianism, the desire to preserve or reactivate the organic moral life of early feudal society was one of the driving forces behind many intellectual changes. Song Neo-Confucians invented the 'heavenly principle' because the vision of a society bound by rituals and music could no longer sustain active moral life in a new social environment. When *lixue* became official doctrine, new challenges to it led to the birth of new ideas. It was through this circle of criticize–institutionalize/bureaucratize–criticize that a system of thought like Confucianism maintained its vitality as the 'propensities of the time' repeatedly changed. Even after the collapse of the system, its concern for an active and spontaneous moral-political life would survive in other lines of thought.

Looking ahead, one might guess that the rise of Maoism, logically an important topic for him, could be treated in a similar way as a system of thought that valued human agency to such an extent that it has often incurred the charge of 'voluntarism'. The interaction between such a system and a huge party-state bureaucracy might well illustrate a similar cycle of intellectual change, in which Wang Hui's own effort to repoliticize what has become depoliticized would take its place. Certainly neither official Marxism nor dogmatic liberalism can hope to overcome the depoliticizing trend of contemporary state and society. The aim of Wang Hui's historical research is to find new theoretical languages for present political criticism. The four volumes seem to spare the contemporary world. But implicitly they address many of its problems: the nature of the Chinese nation and state, market economy, science, progress, modernization. Once Wang Hui discusses the political turmoil of the twentieth century directly, we should see more explicit answers to them.

As he considers these, Wang Hui can hardly avoid the parallels between his own project and situation and those of the late Qing thinkers with whom the narrative of *Rise* concludes. By temperament, he is divided between them. With respect to his vision of a Chinese ecumene, and his style as a constructive reformer—*Dushu* played a leading role in bringing key social issues, like the fate of the countryside or education, to the attention of today's authorities—he resembles Kang Youwei, who occupies the commanding position in his survey of the period. With respect to his intransigent radicalism, and filiation to a revolutionary tradition, he descends from Zhang Taiyan, whom he treats with a special emotion.<sup>20</sup> Zhang could, indeed, be regarded as his intellectual great-grandfather, since Wang Hui's mentor was the literary scholar Tang Tao, who was a student of Lu Xun, whose mentor in Japan was Zhang Taiyan. Between the monarchist and the republican, advisor to the throne and conspirator against it, reconciliation was excluded.<sup>21</sup> The tensions in Wang Hui's work suggest that their memories continue to be at loggerheads with each other. One might speak, to adapt a phrase of Lenin, of the 'two souls' of Wang Hui.

### *Beyond negation*

This may have an indirect bearing on a criticism to be heard in China, that Wang Hui spends too much time criticizing theoretical paradigms in Chinese studies overseas, without providing an alternative to them—or to use the anthropologist Kenneth Pike's distinction, he starts with an *etic* perspective but does not go far enough to spell out an *emic* world. For example, although he challenges the empire/nation-state dichotomy, he does not furnish a better conceptual framework to describe the Chinese political order. Rather he continues to use these terms, adding his own

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<sup>20</sup> See, in English, the eloquent passage in 'Fire at the Castle Gate', NLR 6, November–December 2000, pp. 91–2.

<sup>21</sup> In his famous open letter to Kang of 1903, Zhang described the Guangxu emperor, to whom Kang still expressed reverent allegiance, as a 'despicable little wretch who cannot so much as tell the difference between a bean and a noodle'. Imprisoned for the scandal of this text, he wrote from jail: 'With our people and our culture in their proper places, I must seek to irradiate their splendour. My will has not yet achieved its end. I am still shackled by the enemy state. Others will follow me to renew the golden flame. If our nation's antiquity and our people's historical record should come to an end in my hands, and the continuance of China's broad and magnificent scholarship be severed, this will be my crime to bear.'

qualifications. So one may wonder how, without them, could he discuss the political order of the Qing at all?

There is a grain of truth in this objection, which touches on Wang Hui's habits of thought. Characteristically, confronted with two antipodal concepts, he will avoid choosing between them. He is instinctively averse to binary oppositions, favouring instead interconnexions. For him, such static oppositions typically miss the complexity of history, and he tries to deconstruct them, to liberate its dynamism from their rigid conceptual grip. This instinct has enabled Wang Hui to discover new problems and set new agendas. His theoretical writing, however, has long since earned a reputation for being very opaque. Here it seems his distrust of binary oppositions has had a negative influence on his style, and readers' acceptance of his work. Treated as realities, binary oppositions may obstruct our view of the dynamism of history; but taken as ideal types, they possess the virtue of conceptual precision and sharpness, and are conducive to political mobilization.

Wang Hui does not welcome ideal types, as too easily reified. The cost of this is that he has to specify an enormous mass of historical details, insisting that binary oppositions pay no attention to the interconnexions between their terms. His customary effort is to establish these. However, this may still be insufficient. For those who employ binary oppositions rarely deny the existence of interconnexions—they simply insist that their strength is not significant enough to challenge their conceptual framework. To answer them, a further step is needed: to demonstrate the strength of such relations, or even give them an independent concept. A key weakness of Wang Hui's narrative lies in its lack of middle-range conceptual tools that would summarize the linkages he makes, and calibrate their strength. In the absence of these, he is better at dismantling the theoretical structures of others than erecting his own.

This seems to be true, too, of the central concept driving the project of *Rise*. Wang Hui set out, not to trace in conventional fashion the historical origin of a certain contemporary process, but to retrieve the possibilities of China's 'modernity' at many historical moments. By the end of his story, however, the meaning of this 'modernity' is still uncertain. All we know is that it should differ from a Western-confected modernity characterized by linear temporality, atomist notions of the individual, the nation-state, separation of the three realms of value, etc. Wang Hui's

pursuit is admirable, but the indeterminacy of his ‘alternate modernity’ is a potentially self-defeating element in his grand project. He is searching for but has not found that structured alternative. He hints that many moments in Chinese history can provide resources for us to transcend the modernity of the West, but he does not tell us which moments may be more important than others, or why. This uncertainty is no doubt partially a token of premature theorization—Wang Hui’s project is too grand, too intractable even for him to handle. But this uncertainty is also engrained in the contemporary existential condition of a post-revolutionary world. Wang Hui’s resistance to that world has given us an intellectual cornerstone for these times. His success and failure will equally become nutriment for thinkers to come.