

Whether or not the authors are correct in arguing that “China’s economic development has come full circle” and “it is time to change [from reliance on resource mobilization] to resource efficiency” (p. 164), the fact that investment growth has been maintained since the 1980s is less surprising when looked at from the perspective of other countries’ experiences. In this respect, China’s development narrative replicates that of many other countries, including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, during their economic “take off.” Indeed, the value of China’s capital stock is still significantly below that of the US and Japan. From today’s perspective, even allowing for improvements in capital productivity, the potency of investment has yet to be exhausted. Not least, as Brødsgaard and Rutten point out, the Belt and Road Initiative will also make further extremely heavy demands on investment for infrastructure construction.

Nevertheless, they are right to draw attention to the “lacklustre” growth of household consumption in and after the 1990s (p. 141). Their reference to the potentially important role of the *rural* sector – a market comprising well over half a billion consumers – is also salutary. The rise in the consumption share of GDP in the last five years no doubt owes more to developments in cities than to those in the countryside. But the explosive growth of “Taobao Villages” and recent rapid expansion of rural e-commerce suggest that as rural wages rise the countryside will – alongside lower-tier cities – become the dominant driver of retail expansion in China.

By tracing the evolution of economic discourse since the 1950s this book throws important light on the forces that have shaped Chinese governments’ policy formulation down to the present day. Its nuanced analysis embodies exemplary scholarship and borrows from a remarkable range of Chinese-language materials, as well as drawing on an extensive secondary literature. In the face of so much comment about China that lacks awareness of essential historical context and derives from the use of secondary sources and translated – sometimes mistranslated – materials, these qualities make this book a particular pleasure to read. It is at once provocative, enlightening and authoritative, and it can be confidently recommended to anyone wanting to understand China’s recent and current development trajectories.

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*Rethinking China’s Rise: A Liberal Critique*

XU JILIN (edited and translated by DAVID OWNBY)

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018

xxxii + 218 pp. £75.00

ISBN 978-1-108-47075-9 doi:10.1017/S0305741019001000

Xu Jilin, a professor in the department of history at East China Normal University, is one of the most well-known liberal voices writing from inside the academic institution in China today. Despite defending positions that are often critical of China’s political establishment, Xu is also a nuanced writer who avoids unnecessary provocations and has successfully navigated the academic system. The first collection of his essays in English, expertly translated and introduced by David Ownby, is an eagerly awaited addition to a small body of writings by contemporary Chinese thinkers that has become available for an international readership, and provides a more diverse view of China’s intellectual scene.

The collection does not disappoint. It represents an excellent choice of articles (jointly selected by Xu and Ownby) that reflect the breadth of Xu's interests while also coming together as a coherent body of thought re-examining China's political ideologies in historical perspective. Most were published in the mainland media or on mainland websites between 2010 and 2015, with a few exceptions (one older article published in 2004 in Hong Kong, commemorating Li Shenzhi; one essay published in Taiwan). It is also flawlessly and elegantly translated, making for clear and enjoyable reading. The short introductions to each essay are very useful.

Many of the arguments made by Xu revolve around the dual concepts of culture and civilization, seen as the two frame ideologies that have been embraced in China and around the world in the modern era. Through this lens, China's century-old dilemma of how much to borrow from "the West" appears as less unique. As Xu sees it, after universal civilization emerged as an ideal of the French Revolution, Germany and other areas invaded by Napoleonic armies developed a discourse of (particularistic) culture, in which authenticity is opposed to universality (chapter three).

In chapter one, Xu envisages how universalism and particularism can be combined in original ways, for example by linking the "three traditions" of Confucianism, Enlightenment and Socialism (an idea he borrows from Gan Yang, p. 13), or through Habermas's constitutional patriotism (omitting to discuss however the issue of the implementation of China's constitutional principles). Pluralism is the guiding principle of these harmonious solutions to the dilemma of modernity (p. 92). Chapters two and three, by contrast show how, since the 1990s, particularist "historicism" has been brandished as a weapon by Chinese intellectuals against universal values. Chapter two – one of the most sparkling essays in the volume – retraces how the New Left's critique of the market and civil society combined with the neo-authoritarian proponents of the China model to produce a neo-sovereignist ideology of "statism" inspired by Carl Schmitt. Chapter three compares China's critique of the "ideal west" today to the critiques of "civilization" that appeared in 19th-century Germany. When universal values are lost, Xu argues, "the only remaining contents to be affirmed are a nation's wealth and power as measured by GDP" (p. 82), as in wartime Japan or among proponents of today's "China model." Chapter seven further shows how, after the universalistic embrace of civilization during the May Fourth era, the Japanese invasion of 1931 marked the beginning of a return of particularistic culturalism and historicism, a cycle that was repeated in the universalistic 1980s and the historicist 1990s.

In a second set of chapters, Xu sets out the need to combine a principle of political organization with an ethical stance. In chapter four, he borrows Charles Taylor's notion of "great disembedding" to argue that the rupture between the family-state (*jiagu*) and *tianxia* systems resulted in the rise of an unchecked state authority and an atomized modern self. He again borrows Habermas's concepts to propose a new connection between the systems-world (that must be prevented from colonizing personal lives) and the lifeworlds of individuals. Rights-liberalism needs to be complemented by a community (a space where people can "exchange emotions," p. 111), which can be provided by a revised notion of *tianxia*, redefined as an enlightenment community, an example of Habermas's non-utilitarian lifeworld where people exchange feelings. We may also note, however, that the democratic texture of such a community or the role of elections in constituting it are not discussed. Confucianism, as argued in chapter five, can also represent a set of civil teachings that give meaning to people's lifeworlds. Chapter six argues that a revised *tianxia*, disburdened of centre and hierarchy, and redefined as a "universality based on recognition of the other"

(p. 137) could also be used to re-establish a fairer international order that overcomes the limitations of Westphalian sovereignty. However, the concrete application of this principle to the peripheral territories claimed by China seems overly optimistic. Li Shenzhi, the famous establishment intellectual who evolved from Party loyalty to liberalism, is discussed in the last chapter (Xu's obituary after Li's death in 2003). Li's biography in some ways represents the adaptation of the ideal of the scholar-official in different historical contexts, for whom Havel's notion of "living in truth" could reconnect with Wang Yangming's concept of authenticity.

David Ownby's introduction provides very useful background about Xu Jilin and the context in which his thinking has evolved. He situates Xu as a liberal critic of political trends in China, grounded in a belief in the rule of law and a power-limiting constitutionalism (xi), but also as a member of a global community of thinkers and a participant in debates on global liberalism. While critiquing historicism and neo-Confucianism, Xu also re-appropriates parts of China's past for the liberal cause. In his view, China has its own claims to universal civilization, and can contribute a moral dimension to modern democratic systems. A small quibble is that Ownby's introduction may not distinguish sufficiently between establishment, public and citizen intellectuals. While Xu may play all three of these roles at different times, they might be more carefully discerned.

Finally, the most interesting question raised by the title and the introduction is: is Xu Jilin's critique of China's current political thinkers really liberal? Xu embraces a limited form of liberalism but argues that it should be complemented by new forms of community connections. Habermas, perhaps not a canonical liberal thinker, has clearly played an important role in the evolution of Xu's concepts. However, as Ownby underlines, Xu's preoccupation with ethics and his preference for grounding new community ties in shared moral values are also steeped in (liberal) Confucianism. His endorsement of the notion of *tianxia* and moral values may be a response to the rise of historicism and of the current "right is might" ideology of the China Dream; however, they also represent choices that are decidedly in tension with certain more democratic, egalitarian representations of society.

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*Unmaking China's Development: The Function and Credibility of Institutions*

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Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017

xx + 316 pp. £75.00

ISBN 978-1-107-09410-9 doi:10.1017/S0305741019000894

This well-researched and well-written book offers a provocative and yet remarkably insightful revisit of the institutions that govern land and property rights in China, focusing on their evolution and the role they have played in economic development. Framed within the literature of institutionalism, the analysis challenges the commonly held neo-liberal wisdom that formal and secure private property rights are the institutional foundation for development. Rather, as the author argues, informal, insecure and non-private property rights could serve crucial social functions under specific contexts and hence be broadly perceived by relevant actors as commonly accepted arrangements or as, using the concept developed in the book, credible institutions.