

MODERNITY AGAINST MODERNITY: WANG HUI'S CRITICAL HISTORY OF CHINESE THOUGHT*

VIREN MURTHY
University of Chicago

In the last fifteen years or so, Chinese intellectuals have been heatedly debating the complex relationships between China's prospects, China's past, and the modern predicament. In this context Wang Hui has emerged as one of China's most challenging and controversial intellectuals. His work is controversial. At a time when intellectuals take modernization as a goal, Wang has consistently voiced reservations. Readers find his works challenging because, instead of criticizing modernity or capitalism from simple moral tenets, Wang has always sought to redefine the terms of the debate through detailed and sensitive historical analysis. Hence amidst his busy life as editor, professor, and polemicist, Wang has devoted more than ten years to writing his magisterial four volume book *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (*Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi*), in which he fundamentally rethinks the relationship between modernity and Chinese thought. However, Wang's book is not just an immense contribution to historical and historiographical scholarship; his work is a self-consciously political intervention. Specifically, he highlights the role of intellectual history as critique and attempts to recover repressed elements of the past in order to question the structures that govern the present. In the last line of the conclusion to his book he writes, "the history that modernity loftily and even proudly rejects contains the inspiration and possibilities for overcoming its crisis."¹ Taking China as his focus, Wang attempts to write this history.

Wang examines how the conceptual legacies of Chinese thought were taken up by various intellectuals throughout Chinese history and especially during the period of global capitalist modernity. In so doing, Wang questions conventional

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1 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi* (*The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*), 4 vols. (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2004) 4: 1492. This and all other translations of this work are my own.

assumptions about China's historical relationship with "Western" modernity and, consequently, provides additional resources to develop a critique of contemporary global modernity. In Wang's view, twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals were able to draw on resources from the Chinese past because during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) China experienced an important social and intellectual transformation which anticipated aspects of what we now call modernity. If the similarities between Song Dynasty thought and society and modernity became a precondition for twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals' understanding of modern Western thought, the tension between the practices of Song Dynasty Confucianism and the structures of capitalist modernity generated a space for a critique of global capitalist modernity. In particular, by the beginning of the twentieth century, intellectuals were able to draw on the multifaceted traditions of Chinese thought in order to imagine alternatives to their contemporary world of capitalist modernity. By examining the way in which Chinese intellectuals from the Song to the early twentieth century constantly reinterpreted the past in order to critically understand the present, Wang reflexively underscores the contemporary relevance of his historical genealogy of modern Chinese thought. Although Wang's work takes China as its focus his genealogical method of critique addresses, because he constantly underscores the global nature of modernity, a more generally relevant problematic. In particular, Wang's work suggests that, in other parts of the world, including the West, overcoming capitalist modernity and imagining alternatives will be inextricably linked to retrieving resources that modernity rejects or forgets and rethinking these forgotten resources in light of the present.

WANG HUI IN CONTEXT

Wang Hui begins his book by stating that his aim is not to write a complete history but "by interpreting thought historically, to propose a number of different understandings of modern problems."² Wang began writing this book in the mid-1990s and by locating the discursive shifts in China during the 1980s and the 1990s we can get a sense of how intellectuals framed such "modern problems."

Beginning in 1978 the Chinese Communist Party initiated its project of "opening and reform," which involved recognizing that China was in an early stage of socialism and hence needed to increase productive forces. As is well known, during the period from the 1980s through the 1990s, China rapidly increased economic growth and foreign trade. To cite just one statistic, from 1978 to 1997 the amount of China's foreign trade grew from \$38 billion to

2 Wang Hui, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2004), 1: 3.

\$300 billion.³ We can describe this transformation as a process of integration into the global capitalist system, which would change every aspect of Chinese life. Although we can look at the transformation as one single process of economic and political reform, the suppression of the 1989 social movement on 4 June marked a notable shift in both political policy and intellectual culture.

During the 1980s intellectuals were mostly cadres and hence part of the official state apparatus. Communist Party officials were split between so-called conservatives, who were reluctant to proceed with market reforms, and party members, who believed that market reforms were integral to realizing socialism in China. Intellectuals were generally in favor of the reforms and many hoped for quicker marketization and more liberal freedoms. The Cultural Revolution was fresh in the mind of these intellectuals and they believed that the Communist Party was hindering China from progress toward a more liberal regime.

Intellectuals saw their mission and responsibility as helping China reform and hence conceived of themselves as inheritors of the so-called Enlightenment intellectuals of the May 4th Movement, which began with demonstrations on that date in 1919. Intellectuals of the 1980s conceived of the May 4th Movement in terms of the Communist Party historians' categories; in other words, they believed that May 4th Movement intellectuals were helping China move from feudalism to capitalism. In the 1980s intellectuals concluded that the Cultural Revolution and Mao's various policies showed that China had not really relinquished its feudal tradition and that, therefore, they needed to continue the May 4th criticism of feudalism. Against this feudal tradition, intellectuals posited a narrative of freedom, which was often associated with the West.

During the mid- and late 1980s intellectuals began to get some autonomy from the state and started to form a number of movements criticizing the government, focusing on various issues, including the increasing problem of corruption and inequality. These movements came to an anticlimactic end when the government suppressed the 1989 social movement on 4 June. After this, both governmental policy and the general shape of intellectual life changed dramatically. According to the Shanghai-based literary critic Wang Yuanhua, the years from 1989 to 1992 were a period of relative intellectual silence, a period of what he calls "reflection" (*fansi*).⁴ The content of such reflection is multifaceted, but one of the key elements was a loss of faith in the earlier Enlightenment project related to the state.

In 1992 Deng Xiaoping and the CCP made their famous decision to accelerate market reforms. As China became further incorporated into the

3 Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen: The Politics of Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

4 Joel Thoraval, "Conscience historique et imaginaire sociale," *Espirit* 303 (February 2004), 171–83.

global system, academic life was subject to greater professionalization and, as a result, intellectuals were more independent from the state from an institutional perspective as well. Joseph Fewsmith notes that as both officials and intellectuals became more professionalized, the gap between them both narrowed and widened. In other words, intellectuals began to focus more narrowly on problems related to their subject of study and less on wider political issues. Moreover, even the debates about larger issues would take place in the slowly growing purely academic journals. During the 1990s officials were often former intellectuals, and they shared a background with academics. At the same time, though, officials saw things from the perspective of the state and hence they sought extremely specific knowledge from intellectuals, such as expertise in engineering or economics. They often deemed intellectuals' debates about larger issues irrelevant.

Mapping the various positions of intellectuals during the 1990s is a complex task. The number of intellectual stances multiplied and, moreover, the meanings of terms such as "conservative" and "radical" were transformed. There were still liberals who saw themselves as continuing the legacy of the May 4th Movement, but unlike the liberals of the 1980s these liberals and neo-liberals combined a criticism of the Mao period with a plea for total marketization. During the 1980s intellectuals were part of the state and often saw their plea for liberal values as part of a vision to achieve a more just socialism. Liberals of the 1990s, in contrast, delinked from the state, aimed for some type of free-market capitalism, and regarded intellectuals who criticized capitalism as "conservatives" who supported the party. This is the sense in which a Japanese supporter of Chinese neo-liberalism, Ogata Kō, contends that in China, unlike in America, it is the neo-liberal proponents of small government who are radical, since they go against the tradition of state socialism, while the so-called New Leftists, such as Wang Hui, are conservative, since they reinforce the ideology of the state.⁵

As we can see, in this reading, the term "conservative" is pejorative and to a large extent continues the discourse of the 1980s in linking the left and the Chinese government in the Mao period with some type of premodernity. However, the tragic end of the Tiananmen social movement caused a number of intellectuals to become suspicious of May 4th radicalism. According to these intellectuals, such as Wang Yuanhua, who are often self-proclaimed conservers of the Chinese tradition, the various May 4th factions were too "radical." In other words, these self-proclaimed conservatives of the 1990s argued that the Chinese tradition had little or nothing to do with Maoism; they conceived of Maoism as an outgrowth

5 Ogata Kō, "Gendai Chugoku jiyushugi," (Modern Chinese Liberalism), in *Chugoku 21* (China 21) 29 (2005), 87–109, 88.

of the excesses of the Enlightenment and the May 4th Movement. They contended that, after all, even in the West, Marxism stemmed from the Enlightenment. From the perspective of the self-proclaimed conservatives, both the liberals who placed too much emphasis on political reforms, and the leftist intellectuals who stressed the rising problem of inequalities, were too radical and would eventually hinder China's path to modernization.

Despite the apparent differences between the conservatives and the liberals, and the diametrically opposite valences of the terms "conservative" and "radical," they both take capitalist modernity as a goal. However, social life changed radically in the 1990s, and the changes made the problems of market reforms apparent. In the early 1990s, following Deng Xiaoping's call for a new period of reform, the economy grew dramatically, causing new income inequalities between regions and between classes.⁶ In this context, some intellectuals criticized market reforms from a "leftist perspective." Many of these intellectuals, such as Cui Zhiyuan and the Gan Yang, both of whom went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, identify to some extent with the liberal tradition, but see a conflict between the ideals of liberalism and the structural logic of contemporary capitalism. Moreover, they see Mao's China and some of his policies as potentially realizing these ideals. Wang Hui is considered one of the leaders of this group, but he is a special case to which I will return.

This variation in political views among intellectuals was partly a result of increasing professionalization and greater contacts with Western academia. Along with this professionalization, intellectuals began to place more emphasis on "scholarship" as something independent of politics and valuable for its own sake. Encouraging this trend, Wang Hui and two intellectuals from Beijing University, Wang Shouchang and Chen Pingyuan, founded the journal *The Scholar*, in order to provide a space for serious scholarship with high standards.

Despite the apparent apolitical nature of scholarship, it is helpful to map some of the connections between historical scholarship and a given intellectual's particular political position with respect to the future of China. From the 1980s Chinese historians were actively engaged in two projects: to retrieve indigenous elements in Chinese thought that anticipate a Western-style Enlightenment and to explain the causes of Maoism.

There are numerous examples of how liberals and conservatives respond to these questions. Two liberals who moved to Hong Kong after the suppression of the 1989 movement, Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng, recently published a book with the title *The Origins of Modern Chinese Thought*,⁷ which many Chinese may associate with Wang's *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*. Jin and Liu attempt

6 Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen*, 102

7 *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de qi yuan* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000).

to show that the basic culture of Confucianism enabled Chinese intellectuals to believe in Marxism and that we can find traces of liberal thinking in late imperial critics of Song and Ming Confucianism such as Dai Zhen (1724–1777). According to Jin and Liu, the Chinese liberal resistance to communism inherits the legacy of Dai Zhen’s criticisms of Confucianism.

Conservatives, such as Yu Yingshi, the Taiwanese historian at Princeton, whose works are among the most popular among scholars in contemporary China, do not attempt to link Maoism to the mainstream of Chinese Confucianism.⁸ Instead, drawing on Edmund Burke, Yu asserts that it is precisely Western-style radicalism and the rejection of the Chinese tradition that lie at the root of the tragedies of Maoism. Hence much of his analysis of Chinese intellectual history aims at a more robust understanding of the Confucian tradition and shows, among other things, that Confucianism had a logic different both from so-called radicalism and from what Chinese Marxists understood under the label of “feudal culture.”

Scholars usually categorize Wang Hui as “New Left,” but he does not really fit into any of the above camps, and creatively he borrows elements from liberals, new leftists, and conservatives. He did his doctoral work in the 1980s on a key literary figure in the May 4th Movement, Lu Xun, and showed that his work could not be understood with simple categories such as modern or traditional. During the 1980s Wang could be characterized as a liberal literary critic, but by the early 1990s he gradually shifted to writing intellectual history and also became increasingly critical of the government’s market reforms. Politically, he clearly shares the leftists’ concern about the reproduction of inequalities and the social domination associated with capitalism. Hence with Cui Zhiyuan and Gan Yang, Wang affirms elements of China’s revolutionary past and laments that so many intellectuals are uncritically bidding farewell to the revolution. Moreover, against liberals such as Jin Guantao, he asserts that the idea of Chinese socialism is “modernity opposed to modernity” and not just “a special manifestation of Chinese thinkers but a reflection of the structural contradictions within modernity itself.”⁹ In other words, Wang does not believe that one can understand Chinese socialism as merely developing the conceptual logic of Confucianism. Rather one must analyze the changes in traditional thought in relation to the dynamics of the global capitalist system of nation states. Although Wang believes that transformations

8 For a sample of Yu Yingshi’s work see *Lishirenwu yu wenhuawei* (Taipei: Sanmin Zongjing Xiao, 1995). For a detailed essay about Yu Yingshi’s scholarship in relations to politics see Michael Quirin, “Yu Yingshi, das Politische und die Politik,” *Minima Sinica: Zeitschrift zum chinesischen Geist* 1 (1994), 27–69.

9 “Questions and Answers about Modernity,” cited in Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen*, 118.

in Confucianism formed the intellectual context for later radical intellectuals, he constantly underscores that such conceptual transformations must be understood in relation to the logic of global capitalist modernity. Hence, for example, he notes that the way modern Chinese draw on Confucius to develop criticism of modernity is analogous to Western radicals rethinking Christianity.

Somewhat paradoxically, Wang draws on both liberal and conservative readings of the tradition. With Jin Guantao and other Chinese liberals, Wang argues that without studying transformations within Confucianism, we will not be able to understand the particular form of resistance that emerged in twentieth-century China. This is one of the reasons we see Wang's extended discussion of Song and Ming Dynasty Confucianism in a book about modern thought. Then, with Yu Yingshi, he affirms a critique of the May 4th Movement's total negation of the tradition and contends that scholars need to save the Chinese tradition from the May 4th and Communist appropriations. But the difference between their respective theories turns on their respective interpretations of modernity. Despite Yu's conservatism, his goal is still modernity and some type of liberal capitalism, and his question is thus, "why did China fail to modernize in a liberal manner?" Yu's answer is radicalism. Yu believes that because Chinese intellectuals were caught in a wave of radicalism, they were blind to liberal alternatives based on gradual change. Wang, on the other hand, claims that because the May 4th intellectuals rejected "the feudal tradition" and accepted the binary distinctions of modernity, such as the distinction between individual and society, later intellectuals, who inherited the May 4th legacy, failed to grasp modernity in a critical manner. This has culminated in a situation in which most intellectuals in China have acquiesced to capitalist modernity.

From the above discussion, we see that Wang understands the Chinese revolutionary legacy as Janus-faced. On the one hand it inherits and continues the critical legacy of late Qing intellectuals who drew on a number of resources, Chinese, Western, and hybrid, to resist aspects of modernity. However, on the other, the Chinese revolution also inherits and institutionalizes the uncritical rejection of tradition, which goes hand in hand with a progressivist vision of history based on the nation state, a vision that is inextricably linked to the capitalist modernity that the revolution was supposedly resisting. Hence one of the key tasks of Wang's *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* is to trace a number of changes and structural transformations in Chinese thought and society in order to understand how, and to what extent, Chinese intellectuals were able to imagine alternatives to capitalist modernity and to show how such possibilities receded from the intellectual terrain. Thus, by examining the constitution of the late Qing imaginary, Wang hopes to provide resources to renew the critique of capitalist modernity.

THE BASIC THEMES IN WANG'S *THE RISE OF MODERN CHINESE THOUGHT*

Wang's book is extremely detailed and here I will only sketch an outline, focusing on particular points of interest. The book is divided into two sections, which are further subdivided into two, so in all there are four parts. The first part is called "Principle and Things" and discusses the break associated with the establishment of the Song Dynasty concept of the "heavenly principle" (*tianli*). The second part is more political and focuses on the transformation of China from empire to nation state from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries and, in particular, analyzes intellectual responses to the changing relations between the central government and China's minorities. In the third part Wang continues this discussion of the transformation from empire to nation during the early twentieth century and examines how, during the final years of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), intellectuals inherited the Song Dynasty concept of the heavenly principle. The fourth part analyzes debates about modern science during the 1920s and 1930s and links the basic framework of these debates to the expansion of global capitalist modernity. In the conclusion Wang probes certain contemporary theoretical issues associated with his argument and, in particular, he situates his work in relation to debates about actually existing socialism and modernity.

Song Dynasty Proto-Modernity

To give readers a sense of the book as a whole, in what follows I weave together discussions from the first three parts and the conclusion of Wang's book. In the first part Wang shows the way that the transformations associated with the Song Dynasty formed the conditions for later intellectuals to be critical of global capitalist modernity and hence, by focusing on this shift, we will later be able to see a number of Wang's arguments come together. Wang basically analyzes the historical changes from the pre-Song to Song in three periods: the Three Dynasties to the Qin dynasty, the Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty, and the Tang–Song transition.

In Wang's view, during the Warring States period (475 BCE–221 BCE) Confucians held immanent visions of the cosmos and politics; they did not posit a transcendent source of political authority. Confucius and his disciples reacted to the chaos in their world and hoped to return to or bring back the ideal government of the Three Dynasties (1700 BCE to 221 BCE), when the courtly rituals and music were harmonious. We know comparatively little about the Three Dynasties, but the last of these dynasties, the Zhou, continued in name until the end of the Warring States period in 221 BCE and hence early Confucians felt a strong sense of continuity with these idealized dynasties. According to these

early Confucians, the rituals and music of the Three Dynasties fully embodied the political ideals of heaven/nature so that there was no separation between rituals or music and an ideal political system.

There are many dimensions to the Confucian idea of rituals, but in general the rituals of the Three Dynasties developed shamanistic practices in a way that secured the general order of society. In a well-cited passage, Confucius asserts that “if you do not study the rituals you will have no means to take a stance.”¹⁰ From this we can see that rituals were intimately related to structuring the various roles that people played and to making government and social life function harmoniously. These rituals were linked to heaven since, as Roger T. Ames notes, they “were constituted in imitation of perceptible cosmic rhythms as a means of strengthening the coordination of the human being and his natural and spiritual environment.”¹¹ In the view of classical Confucians, by the end of the Zhou dynasty or the Warring States period these rituals had begun to change, lose their meaning or become formalistic, and cease to be grounded in the Confucian virtue of humanity (*ren*). Hence they constantly sought to bring back both the content and the spirit of the rituals of the Three Dynasties and of the early Zhou Dynasty in particular.

The Three Dynasties' political structure included certain concrete features such as a decentralized enfeudment system of government called *fengjian*, sometimes translated as “feudalism.”¹² However, the famous Qin emperor unified the Chinese empire and established a more centralized prefectural system in 221 BCE, and this unification established a dynastic legacy that lasted approximately 2000 years. The Qin emperor's government was based on legalism and extremely hostile to Confucianism. Hence during his brief rule of fifteen years Confucianism receded from Chinese history.

The dynasty immediately following the Qin, the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–AD 220), revived Confucianism, but literati were convinced that they could not simply return to the political arrangement of the Three Dynasties, because the Han dynasty, like the Qin, was an empire based on the prefectural system. Literati

10 Confucius, *Analects (Lun Yu)*, ed. Yang Bojun (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 2002), 16.13, 178.

11 Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987) 85–6. Benjamin Schwartz's comment is also helpful: “The order that the *li* (rituals) ought to bind together is not simply a ceremonial order—it is a sociopolitical order in the full sense of the term, involving hierarchies, authority and power.” Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 68.

12 There is a growing consensus that one cannot use the term “feudalism” to describe early China. For a detailed essay that shows why the term is inappropriate see Li Feng, “‘Feudalism’ and Western Zhou China: A Criticism” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 63 (June 2003), 115–44.

thus had to reconstruct Confucianism in a manner appropriate to imperial politics. Although classical Confucians also united heaven to an ideal system of rule, they posited it as a system in the past to be revived. Han Confucians conceived of a homology between the structure of heaven and the structure of moral government; however, they linked this structure more directly with their contemporary imperial system. In neither case is there a clear separation between the ideal system and an actual system, but during the Warring States period the ideal is in the past, while during the Han the ideal is embodied in the present.

Wang continues to trace the complex fluctuations of thought in relation to political change, focusing particularly on the way in which Chinese thinkers critically develop the Han Dynasty concept of heaven/nature. He notes that the Song Dynasty concept of the heavenly principle synthesizes a number of concepts that occurred in previous dynasties and, in particular, Liu Zongyuan's (AD 618–907) concept of the “propensity of the times (时势).”

During the Tang dynasty (618–907) there was an extreme tension between the central empire and the localities, and in this historical environment Liu Zongyuan developed a concept of the propensity of the times in order to support the empire.¹³ This represents an important point in intellectual history, since Liu separated the idea of imperial power from the concept of heaven (*tian*) and grounded imperial legitimacy in historical changes and propensities. Wang explains the concept of the propensity of the times in the following manner:

First the concept of the propensity of the times brings history and its changes into the category of nature and deconstructs the determinate relation between the mandate of heaven and human beings. In this way, it creates a space for the historical practice of a subject.¹⁴

Wang adds that Confucians used this concept of the propensity of the times in a way that anticipated elements of Hegel's philosophy. Just as Hegel historicized the family, civil society, and the state, “Liu Zongyuan looked at the transformation from *fengjian* (decentralization) to the prefectural system as a result of the internal transformation of history.”¹⁵ In Liu's view the movement from decentralization to centralization was a “long process of historical evolution.”¹⁶ However, Wang adds that, unlike Hegel, Liu did not require an overarching historical teleology, but relied on the concept of “self production” in history, which he derived from the *Book of Changes*, the philosopher Zhuang Zi and, in particular, Guo Xiang's

13 The “propensity of the times” was a concept used during the Warring States to attack Confucian assertions about the efficaciousness of certain principles.

14 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 58.

15 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 57.

16 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 57.

(died 302) interpretation of Zhuang Zi. According to this cosmological view, people should not see centralization as eternally valid; rather they should realize that officials centralized government as they responded to a particular historical propensity. They were not fulfilling an overarching historical plan or goal.

From the above discussion we can see that in Wang's view, from 221 BCE until the Song dynasty, through a process that was by no means linear, rulers increasingly centralized political structures and moved further away from the ideal organization of the decentralized *fengjian* system of the Three Dynasties. This process culminated when the rulers of the Song Dynasty established a "prefectural state." The Tang–Song transition is a complex topic, but here are four characteristics on which Wang focuses:

1. The Song dynasty is one that "uses economic rule as the base of centralized authority and was the first dynasty in which a ruler governs the myriad people in a unified manner. The results of this economic centralization would be an extremely solid legacy for later dynasties..." . . . 2 . . . the decline of an aristocratic culture and its replacement with a mature prefectural system, namely a system of absolute centralization and a bureaucracy, which greatly influenced political culture and made it different from that of the Han and Tang dynasties because the Song government standardized the imperial examinations, which gave rise to a new class of gentry and bureaucrats. . . . 3. Because of the struggle during the period of the Five Dynasties¹⁷ and because, after this, there were a number of states with the nation at their base, the dynasties after the Song have a strong national element . . . Unlike the Han and Tang national empires' system of cultural recognition, the Song dynasty represented the emergence of an early nationalism. 4. Corresponding to the above points, Song Confucianism (*lixue*) replaced the textual studies of the Han and Tang and established an early modern new type of Confucian world-view which synthesized the ideas such as citizenship (*guominzhuyi*) populism (an egalitarianism that targeted the aristocracy) and secularism.¹⁸

Wang contends that these social changes anticipated aspects of the emergence of modern society. Put differently, scholars who write in a modern capitalist society will tend to look at the rise in centralization, the decline of the aristocracy, the emergence of a national consciousness, and the emergence of a new abstract system of thought as a move to modernity.

Clearly the use of the term modernity brings up the problem of teleology and, in 1995, Wang wrote an article criticizing this tendency in Max Weber's

17 The period from AD 907 to AD 960, between the Tang and the Song.

18 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 106. These ideas are all linked to the Kyoto School scholar Miyazaki Ishisata's early essay on the Song dynasty, which Wang cites in Chinese. "Dongyang de Jinshi" ("The East Asian Early Modern"), in *Riben xuezhe yanjiu zhongguoshi lunzhu xuanyi*, 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 1.

treatment of Confucianism.¹⁹ He claimed that Weber illegitimately uses a universal paradigm of “rationalization” to study and evaluate Chinese history and stressed that one needed to focus more on the indigenous development of early Chinese history. In *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, he acknowledges this problem and writes, “The concepts such as *jinshi*²⁰ and ‘the early modern’ clearly entail an element of historical teleology, but we can temporarily circumvent the arguments surrounding such concepts and focus on the patterns of Song Confucianism and its historical implications.”²¹

I would contend that when Wang continues to use the concept of modernity he affirms something like Frederick Jameson’s recent statement that “perhaps it might be better to admit that the notions that cluster around the word ‘modern’ are as unavoidable as they are unacceptable.”²² Of course, Wang’s problematic is more complex since he is dealing with a context in which people did not use equivalents of the term “modernity.” However, Wang’s use of the concept “early modernity” is intimately linked to the unavoidability of the concept in contemporary contexts. He uses the term modernity in order to be able to relate his understanding of Chinese history to present contexts.

Wang aims to grasp the historical reality that surrounded the emergence of Song Confucianism and uses larger theoretical concepts to illuminate broad changes in social patterns. The provisional use of the term “modern” in conjunction with detailed historical analysis allows Wang to grasp structural changes that would not appear if one merely analyzed Chinese history in terms of dynasties. We should not forget that although the Chinese did use dynasties to write their own histories, “dynasties” do not mean the same thing when writing from the perspective of the modern state. Now dynasties appear as discrete units and hence obscure the larger trans-dynastic structural patterns and transformations that would help us understand later intellectual developments.

Wang is, of course, not the first to point out the radical social transformation from the Tang Dynasty to the Song and his narratives draw on Kyoto school scholars such as Miyazaki Ichisata and Naitō Kōnan, who were writing in 1920s and 1930s. Miyazaki and Naitō were social historians who argued that the Song Dynasty saw the birth of capitalism, nationalism, bureaucratic centralization, and other aspects we associate with Western modernity. They then claim that Song Confucianism was an expression of this modernity. Wang clearly builds on the

19 Wang Hui, “Weibo yu Zhongguoxiandaixing wenti” (Weber and the Problem of Chinese Modernity), in *idem*, *Wang Hui zixuanji* (Guilin: Guangxi shifandaxue chubanshe, 1997).

20 *Jinshi* is the Chinese pronunciation of the Japanese character couplet *kinsei*, which Japanese historians use to refer to the early modern.

21 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 111

22 Frederic Jameson, *Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 13.

rich empirical analysis of the Kyoto school historians. Moreover, he follows them in suggesting that Song Confucians had something like national consciousness. For example, Wang shows that the Song Confucians' attack on Buddhism was not only a secular attack on the rise of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, but also an affirmation of a new national identity. Since at least the late Tang, Confucians began to associate Buddhism with barbarians.²³

However, unlike the Kyoto School scholars, he does not simply associate the Song Dynasty with a Western type of modernity. He explains,

we need to distinguish the historical factors behind what the Song Confucians experienced as a "principled propensity" (*lishi*, 理势) from what we now label with modernity, capitalism and such categories. Thereby we can liberate these "factors" from the logic of historical determinism (modernization theory is the most complete expression of this historical narrative of determinism).²⁴

Notice that, by using the term "principled propensity," Wang attempts to use indigenous categories to grasp the transition from the Tang to the Song. Moreover, unlike the Kyoto school, who define modernity in terms of nationalism or other popular concepts, Wang claims that the emergence of a new conceptual framework is not merely an expression of social changes; rather new concepts are both constitutive of these changes and serve to critique the social phenomena that were their conditions for possibility. In Wang's words,

If the above described characteristic elements of Song dynasty society—centralized government, market economy, long distance trade, proto-nationalism, individualism and so on—can be summarized as an "early modernity," then we can summarize the political and social content of the Confucianism with the heavenly principle at the center as a theory that criticizes elements of this so-called 'early modernity.'²⁵

It is important to note that the quoted passage is in the conditional and that the term "early modernity" appears in scare-quotes throughout the text, which suggests that Wang points to how aspects of the Song system anticipate modernity without implying that the society as a whole anticipated Western transformations. Moreover, although Wang clearly believes that the above transformations are an important part of the transformations from the Tang to the Song, he underscores that Song Confucianism emerged in tension with these transformations.

More importantly, in Wang's view none of the social phenomena in question, such as proto-nationalism, are the most important legacy of the Tang–Song transformation, especially in terms of intellectual history. Although there are massive transformations in society in the Song, Wang emphasizes that the

23 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 248–9.

24 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 67.

25 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 110.

subsequent development of political form was by no means linear. For example, given the moves from nation-based identity to multi-ethnic imperial identity from the Song (960–1279) to the Yuan (1206–1368) and from the Ming (1368–1644) to the Qing dynasties (1644–1911), intellectuals would also revive elements antithetical to Song Confucianism, such as Han Dynasty textual criticism.

According to Wang, the most important aspect of the Tang–Song transition is the emerging rift between ideal and existence. After the Song, Confucians could not advocate simply returning to the Three Dynasties and they could not directly link institutions of the present system to heaven. In other words, the split between an ideal system and any existing system would remain and this was the legacy of the heavenly principle.

The “heavenly principle” is difficult to define, but here is Wang’s gloss on the term:

The concept of the heavenly principle combines the ideas of heaven (*tian*) and principle (*li*): “Heaven” expresses the highest point of the principle and an ontological foundation. “Principle” suggests that the cosmos and myriad things become their own foundation. The compound heavenly principle occupies the highest place and replaces categories such as heaven, deity, the way and the heavenly way, which formerly occupied the highest place in traditional cosmologies or theories of the mandate of heaven or morality. From this time onwards, it is presupposed that all categories and concepts are organized in relation to the heavenly principle at the center.²⁶

Rather than claiming that the Song is “modern” because of a new national consciousness, he focuses on the emergence of a clear distinction between what exists (*shiran*), any historical system past or present, and what ought to be (*yingran*), an ideal system. We can see a similar pattern in Western Enlightenment thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, who do not base morality on any existing empirical thing, but on a transcendental conception of reason. Hence previous scholars of Song Confucianism such as Chen Lai have compared this body of thought to Kantian deontology.²⁷ However, although the European Enlightenment was linked to a conception of progressive history, Wang notes that the split between ideal and system opened a space for Song Confucians to use

26 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 111–12. Note also, “The establishment of the concept of the heavenly principle indicates that morality must be based on an apriori principle . . . It is not a specific system, rituals, and music and morality, but an abstract and all pervasive “principle” that forms the source of morality and its highest standard.” *Ibid.*, 209.

27 Chen Lai, *Songminglixue* (Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism) (Liaoning: Liaoningjiaoyu chubanshe, 1995), 2. There is now a cottage industry of studies about Song Confucianism but, unlike Wang’s, most studies, such as Chen Lai’s, analyze concepts at an abstract level and do not have as their aim historical analysis.

the heavenly principle with the ideal of the Three Dynasties to criticize salient elements of their society, such as a new emerging division of social classes.

Song Confucians constantly advocated returning to original Confucianism as an ideal, but Wang explains that Song Confucians also realized that they could not revive the system of the Three Dynasties. Using the concept of the propensity of the times, Song Confucians argued that the ideal of the rituals and music of the Three Dynasties and even the ideal of *fengjian* no longer legitimized a particular political system; they were appropriate at the time because they accorded with the heavenly principle and represented the propensity of the times, but in the Song a different propensity was in place. Thus the Song Confucians accepted the new prefectural system as a basic assumption and proposed criticisms as a way of reforming it in accordance with their ideals.

We see, then, that the Song Dynasty Confucians themselves distinguish between what exists and an ideal system. To do so, they separate the actual system that existed in the Three Dynasties from the ideal political system based on the heavenly principle. Moreover, Song intellectuals then claimed that the distinction between system and ideal had existed ever since the Han Dynasty. However, Wang shows that when Song Confucians make this gesture they cover up the complex way in which Song Confucianism develops the legacy of the past by radicalizing the split between system and ideal. Since the Han dynasty, to some extent, Confucians separated heaven from the ideal of the Three Dynasties, but they inscribed a concrete political ideal into the concept of heaven in order to justify present political structures.²⁸ From a historical perspective, the Song Dynasty concept of the heavenly principle represents a radical break between principle or ideal and any temporal political system. This opened a space for literati to interpret creatively the Confucian Classics.

Wang notes that, in this new space, Song Confucians revived Confucian classics in order to criticize both the tendency of the Song state to centralize and the rising inequalities linked to the emergence of a market economy. In making these criticisms, Song Confucians creatively drew on the ideal of the system of the Three Dynasties and, more specifically, classical Confucian concepts such as the well-field system (*jingtian*, 井田) and the decentralized system of *fengjian* (封建). However, unlike their Warring States predecessors, Song Confucians did not aim to bring the Three Dynasty system back; rather they inscribed their own ideals into their image of the Three Dynasties and then often spoke of infusing

28 Wang explains Dong Zhongshu's attempt to link heaven to political institutions: "Heaven and earth and yin and yang express a hierarchical relationship of the cosmos. The relationship between the ruler and the minister and the relationship between the ruler and the people correspond to this hierarchical order." (Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 160–61), 1.

the prefectural system of the Song Dynasty with the ideals of *fengjian* and the well-field system.²⁹

Wang's lengthy discussion of Song Confucianism and the social transformations that made it possible serves to frame his discussion of later Chinese thinkers. He contends that by examining the development of Song Confucianism one can better understand the following question:

Why is it that we can see in people such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, Zhang Taiyan, Lu Xun (along with the leaders of two Chinese revolutions, Sun Yatsen, and Mao Zedong) a paradoxical way of thinking—while in the process of pursuing modernity, to varying degrees, they harbored a critical perspective with respect to capitalism and its political forms?³⁰

Wang clarifies this question as “how was it possible that Chinese intellectuals since the late Qing sought a modernity without capitalism?”³¹ Wang's answer to the question “how was it possible” is not simply that the early twentieth-century intellectuals inherited the Song Confucian concept of the heavenly principle; rather he constantly tells a story in which intellectuals drew on a number of different resources, in light of complex transformations in political form. Hence, although Wang highlights the aspects of the Song dynasty that resemble modernity and notes how the basic paradigm of thought established by Song Confucians continued to affect later dynasties, he emphasizes the way in which changes in political form gave rise to different intellectual responses. For example, unlike the officials of the Song, the Manchu rulers of the Qing (1644–1911) used an imperial form of government in order to promote unity amongst a multi-ethnic populace. Hence the Qing Dynasty inheritance of Song and Ming Confucianism would be inflected by problems associated with reconstituting a multi-ethnic empire, the largest in Chinese history. Throughout the second part Wang focuses on the way in which the Qing Confucians reinterpreted Confucianism in a way that would consolidate the legitimacy of Manchu minority rulers and also alleviate tensions between the empire and Tibetan and Mongol minorities.

However, the story is even more multifaceted because from at least the middle of the nineteenth century Chinese intellectuals consciously confronted the global capitalist system of nation states as they were trying to deal with the crisis

29 See Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 231. Wang claims that Song Confucians such as Zhang Zai and Hu Yong actually inscribed the Tang Dynasty concept of equal land system (均田制) into the classical Confucian concepts of *fengjian* and the well-field system. The Tang Dynasty system was relatively equal, having abolished the aristocracy of the Wei and Jin periods. However, as market relations emerged in the Song, a new type of inequality emerged.

30 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 67.

31 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 67.

of the Qing Empire with respect to ethnicity. In the second and third parts Wang provides a number of detailed studies of how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century intellectuals drew on various historical resources to deal with their multidimensional crisis. We will thus see that late Qing thinkers resisted capitalism not merely on the level of economic organization by invoking concepts related to Song Confucianism, but also by invoking the multi-ethnic political organization of empire against the homogenizing forces of the nation-state system, which Wang calls the “political form of capitalism.”³² I will focus on Wang’s analysis of a scholar who brings together many disparate strands in the book, and who advocated internally transforming the empire into a multi-ethnic nation state: Kang Youwei (1858–1927).

Kang Youwei and the Legacies of Confucianism

Kang Youwei excelled in the imperial examination and had extremely close ties to the Qing court. Unlike the intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s, who are discussed in the fourth part, Kang was educated in the classics and responded to the transformations related to the global capitalist system of nation states partially within this classical framework. Wang shows how Kang refashioned Confucianism as a religion to enter this global system and to pose an alternative. Kang attempted to preserve the multi-ethnic dimension of the Qing Empire, and to this end he would draw on Han Dynasty Confucians, such as Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE). On the other hand, in his attempt to establish China as a nation state he would, like many other reformers, invoke the general principle, which was influenced by the Song Dynasty concept of the heavenly principle. Finally, Kang re-imagines empire on a global level to project a utopian vision of a world without nation states and without private ownership.

Kang Youwei inherited the project of New Text Confucians, who sought to redefine Chinese identity in cultural terms in order to legitimate the Manchu rulers and allow decentralized control of Tibetans and Mongolians. According to this theory, being Chinese was not dependent on racial characteristics; rather non-Chinese could become Chinese if they practiced Confucian rituals and music. Since Kang stressed the unity of the empire, rather than invoke Song or Ming Dynasty proto-nationalism, he stressed a narrative of imperial continuity from the Qin and Han dynasties onwards.

The traditional notion of empire or “all under heaven” (*tianxia*), as it is often called, implies blurring the distinction between inside and outside or Chinese and barbarian. This was naturally the policy that various late Qing Confucians promoted in times of ethnic crisis. However, given the numerous defeats that

32 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 4: 1485

China faced at the hands of foreign countries in a series of wars and invasions after the Opium War in 1842, Chinese intellectuals had to recognize their presence in a world system. In Kang's words,

now our country is in a period when countries mutually struggle; it is not the time when the empire is closed off. During the period when countries mutually struggle, knowledge about politics, technology, literature and crafts can all be set up side by side and those who are behind will become extinct.³³

Wang notes that when placed in the inter-state system, China went from being the cosmos to becoming a "state (*guojia*)." This point had already been made by the famous Chinese historian Joseph Levenson;³⁴ however, Wang notes that this particularization of the term for Chinese (*Zhongguo*) was accompanied by a re-universalization of the term for all-under-heaven (*tianxia*), which subsequently would refer to the entire world system.³⁵ Kang's response to this new world was complex. On the one hand, as the above quote indicates, Kang advocated that China should become a sovereign state, which depended on stressing national identity. But, on the other hand, in order to resolve China's internal tensions with respect to minorities and indeed legitimate minority rule, officials needed to blur the distinction between inside and outside and stress a loose imperial unity.

Kang's answer to this dilemma was to advocate transforming the empire into a strong nation (*qiang guo*). From a philosophical perspective Kang repeats a gesture of Song Confucians. At the beginning of Wang's chapter, he cites Kang saying, "Confucius established all-under heaven, established ancestors, but today one purely aims to create citizens. In this case, one must change the rituals and codes. This is what is called time (*shi* 时)." ³⁶

Kang contends that Confucian rituals must adapt to the propensities of nation states. Kang then universalizes Confucianism and although he often referred to Confucianism as a religion, his descriptions of it are also intimately linked to science. For example, Kang naturalized key terms of Confucianism, such as rituals and humaneness (*ren*). "Rituals are the natural way of humans and a necessary element of the principle of things."³⁷ Wang explains that this naturalization of rituals quickly leads Kang to naturalize humaneness. For Kang,

"humaneness" is not only the essence of morality, but it is the essence of the world and the cosmos. . . . In this sense, Kang precisely returns to the logic of the universalism of

33 Cited in Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 1: 741, from *Kang Youwei zhenglunji*, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 1981), 1: 301

34 Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: The Problem of Intellectual Continuity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

35 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 2: 762.

36 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 2: 737.

37 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 2: 748.

Song Confucians concept of the heavenly principle: humaneness and rituals are apriori objective knowledge that transcends cultural difference and historical experience.³⁸

Wang notes that Kang draws on an abstract version of the Song conception of principle. Kang's concept of universality transcends not only China, but the earth.³⁹ Kang and other late Qing intellectuals often used the term "general principle" (*gongli*) to refer to this universal law. The general principle combines the Western discourse of science and Confucian visions of the cosmos.⁴⁰ Because of the polysemic nature of this concept, late Qing intellectuals could use it to point to a post-national utopia even as they made it integral to the nation-building project.

Wang explains that the "general principle" shares with the character couplet for the "heavenly principle" the character for "principle" (*li*)⁴¹ and, like its Song dynasty ancestor, the "general principle" has both an epistemological/ontological dimension and an ethical/political dimension. Of the many differences between the heavenly principle and the general principle, Wang emphasizes the different temporality of the latter. In many late Qing thinkers' philosophies, the general principle is intimately linked to evolution and hence, in contrast to the world view of the heavenly principle and the idea of the propensity of the time, the general principle introduces a teleological emphasis on the future. Hence, as we shall see, Kang Youwei envisions evolution toward a utopian future.

Although the general principle can point beyond the nation state, it entailed the nation state as a necessary stage on the way to a post-national utopia. In part three Wang deals with the way in which two other reformers associated with Kang, Yan Fu (1853–1921) and Liang Qichao (1873–1939), used the general principle in relation to the nation state. In political and moral philosophy the character I translate as "general" in the character couplet for "general principle," namely "*gong*," can mean "public" or the "common good" and hence the concept of the "general principle" is intimately related to visions of a political community. In fact Wang notes that in the late Qing context the words for "public" (*gong*), general principle (*gongli*), and community or group (*qun*) were mutually interchangeable.⁴²

Wang highlights the multifaceted ways in which Liang and Yan used terms related to *gong* and shows this concept's complex relation to the modern nation state. On the one hand it represented an attempt by late Qing intellectuals to enter the international state system and hence reproduces problems of modernity; in

38 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 2: 749.

39 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 2: 760.

40 Wang notes that Kang combined the discourse of geometry and the Confucian visions of the cosmos. Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 2: 762–3.

41 Wang Hui, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 2: 53.

42 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 3: 1023.

this sense *gong* entails the triumph of the nation state over previous forms of community. On the other hand *gong* also represents a critique of the modern nation state and an attempt to infuse the modern state with certain Confucian ideals associated with the Three Dynasties. For example, Liang attempts to combine the ideal of the Three Dynasties with the modern state to form a regime based on equality, local autonomy, and participation.⁴³ Wang claims that historians, such as Chang Hao and Benjamin Schwartz, overlook the latter critical gesture and consequently fault Liang and Yan for being statist and for failing to provide a space for individuality or civil society.

In addition to overlooking the critical dimension of Yan and Liang's thought, Wang claims that the above view does not grasp the fact that state and civil society were not separate in the late Qing:

The binary opposition of state and society in Western social theory and economic theory originates with the history of the capitalist class occupying civil society and then competing with the aristocratic state, but during the late Qing, the category of society was suited to the historical need to create a modern state.⁴⁴

In Wang's view, unlike the period between the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries in Europe, in early twentieth-century China intellectuals did not see state and society as opposed to one another; they looked at society as a means of creating a strong state.

We should not equate the idea of a strong state with that of an autocratic state. As we have seen, Liang envisioned an ideal state that would both be strong and allow for participation. And yet, despite these ideals, the interconnection between local groups, society, and the state in the theoretical realm corresponded to an institutional process that entailed the expansion of state power through local organizations or groups. The Qing government was initially hostile to the reformer's proposals of 1898; however, during the early 1900s, it implemented the so-called "New Government Policies" which incorporated much of the reformers' agenda. Wang draws on the work of Prasenjit Duara's *Culture, Power and the State* to show how, in pursuing these reforms, the Qing state penetrated society:

Prasenjit Duara describes the New Government Policies of the late Qing as a 'Chinese pattern of state strengthening—closely interwoven with modernizing and nation-building goals.'⁴⁵ This is because 'all regimes, whether central or regional, appeared to respect the administrative extensions of state power in local society... whatever their goals, they

43 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 3: 940–1.

44 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 3: 840.

45 Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 2.

assumed that these new administrative arrangements were the most convenient means of reaching rural communities.⁴⁶

Kang Youwei also supported this state-building project as a necessary response to the international system but he realized that such a project fell far short of his Confucian ideals. Hence he drew on the concepts related to the world view of the general principle to provide a global alternative to capitalist modernity, which transcended the system of nation states. Hence, unlike previous Confucians, who primarily used the idea of returning to the past in order to propose policies for the present, by placing Confucianism in an evolutionary framework Kang projected the Confucian ideal of the “great community” into the future. Although he accepted the global capitalist system of nation states as a present reality, he stressed that the world would eventually evolve into a Confucian type of socialism. Wang explains that in Kang’s magnum opus, *The Great Community*, he

clearly sees the unavoidable authoritarian characteristics of the modern state and the deep-seated authoritarianism of the theory of the modern state. This is an attempt to transcend the capitalist modernity that China is now in the midst of eagerly pursuing. It is a plan for an anti-modern modernity. It is a religious reaction to the process of “China’s” becoming organized as a secularized capitalism.⁴⁷

Wang continues by making a comparison with European socialism:

If one says that European socialism is a secular religious movement that developed from Christianity to criticize the nation-state, then Kang Youwei’s ideal of the *Great Community* is a theoretical attack that developed from the Confucian tradition and is pitted against autonomous nation-states.⁴⁸

Wang finds in Kang a religious gesture against the system of nation states. In this sense he echoes Arif Dirlik’s remarks in *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*: “Within the context of this utopianism . . . the emerging Chinese national consciousness appears not merely as a defensive parochialism, but as a step in an idealistic project whose ultimate goal was the transformation of humanity globally.”⁴⁹ Dirlik also notes that this was made possible once Confucianism was disassociated from institutions particular to imperial China.⁵⁰ Wang shows that this break between Confucian ideology and specific institutions had already begun in the Song Dynasty with the formation of the concept of

46 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 3: 1061; Duara, *Culture, Power and the State*, 3.

47 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 2: 826.

48 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 2: 826–7.

49 Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley, California University Press, 1991), 56.

50 Dirlik, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*, 55.

the heavenly principle. Kang then combined a Confucian idea of re-imagining the past as an ideal with a future-oriented concept of time, namely evolutionary time, to project a utopian future, which would show the limitations of the global capitalist present. In this future, once again the rift between ideal and system would be bridged.

Capitalist Modernity and the Limits of Late Qing Criticism

In the fourth part Wang shows the way in which the late Qing thinkers' resistance to capitalist modernity via recourse to traditional concepts comes to an end. I will not discuss Wang's treatment of the discourses of science, but will move directly to the conclusion, in which Wang focuses on contemporary debates about modernity and capitalism. By analyzing Wang's argument in this section, we can get a sense of his work as a whole.

At first glance, Wang's position seems to resemble certain postwar Japanese historians of China, such as Nishi Junzō and Mizoguchi Yūzō, both of whom formed their theories during the Cold War. Nishi and Mizoguchi are actually considered to be at opposing sides of a debate in China studies in Japan, a debate between those who believe that modernity emerged in China after it entered the global capitalist system (Nishi) and those who stress the internal dynamic related to modern Chinese thought (Mizoguchi).⁵¹ However, they both anticipate Wang's claim that beginning in the late Qing and continuing during the Communist period, Chinese politics was involved in "a modernity against modernity" struggle. They both emphasize that Chinese modernity is different from Western modernity or capitalism. For Nishi this difference stems from Chinese modernity being a modernity of resistance or a modernity of negation, while for Mizoguchi, the difference stems from an internal dialectic of Chinese thought and society. In particular, for both Nishi and Mizoguchi we could rewrite Wang's phrase as "Chinese/socialist modernity against capitalist modernity" or "Chinese modernity against Western imperialism." Hence, for both Nishi and Mizoguchi, socialist China represented an actually existing alternative modernity, which was intimately linked to ideals developed since the late Qing.

Mizoguchi's works are popular in China and Wang clearly develops Mizoguchi's attempt to trace the roots of Chinese intellectuals' resistance to transformations in imperial Confucianism. On the other hand Wang's remarks on socialism more closely echo Nishi's emphasis on imperialism. In a more

51 See Mizoguchi Yūzō, *Zhongguo qianxiandai sixiang de yanbian*, trans. by Suo Jieran and Gong Yi (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 1997).

political essay Wang writes,

This “anti-modern theory of modernization” is a characteristic not just of Mao Zedong’s thought . . . it is one of the major characteristics of Chinese thought from the late Qing onward. The tendency to anti-modernism was not only a function of what people refer to as traditional factors, but was even more importantly a result of the fact that the discourse on China’s search for modernity was shaped in the historical context of imperial expansion and a crisis in capitalism.⁵²

We can see similarities between Wang’s discussion of modernity and Nishi’s account of modern Chinese thought. In his famous essay “The Idea of the People in Modern Chinese Thought” Nishi narrates modern Chinese history:

China ardently sought to be free and independent as it resisted the oppression and invasion of a modernity that came from the outside. . . One of the characteristics of modern Chinese history is that “modernity” from the outside took the form of the “modern” state, first with England and then with Japan, and China, which resisted, was an imperial dynasty . . . A situation emerged such that the Chinese people, through forming a “modern” state, resisted this “modernity” that came from the outside.⁵³

By rooting China’s modernity in resistance, Nishi, like Wang, avoids cultural exceptionalism. Unlike Mizoguchi, Nishi does make culture the primary category to explain China’s difference from the rest of the world. In Nishi’s view Chinese modernity is different from Western imperialist modernity, but it has something in common with other modernities that were formed in the midst of struggles for national independence. There are, however, a number of differences between Nishi’s, Mizoguchi’s, and Wang’s formulations. For our purposes, we should focus on a distinction we have already seen in Song Confucians, namely the difference between the actually existing system and the ideal of transcendence. In this case, we must examine the way Wang highlights the difference between a post-capitalist ideal and actually existing socialism in relation to state formation in twentieth-century China.

In the conclusion of his essay Wang problematizes the distinction between state socialism and capitalism by examining the assumptions of contemporary criticisms of actually existing socialism. He develops this argument by first showing that contemporary critics of socialism often operate with false distinctions between “planned economy” and market and between state and capitalist economy. In fact, he suggests that the nation state itself is inextricably linked to the logic of capital.

52 Wang Hui, *China’s New Order*, trans. Theodore Hutters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 150.

53 Nishi Junzō, *Chosaku Shū* (Collected Works), 3 vols. (Tokyo, Uchiyama shoten, 1995), 2: 203.

Unlike many scholars, Wang rejects as spurious the idea that socialism stresses the public/state realm, while capitalism expands the private realm. Following Karl Polanyi, he underscores that, unlike “natural economies,” capitalism involved a type of monopoly:

It is not just that market society does not protect the private realm in the manner that contemporary Chinese economists and intellectuals hope, on the contrary, the “invisible” relations between the market and controlling power incessantly transform “the private realm” into the “social realm.”⁵⁴

Wang notes that we should not think of capitalism as providing a private sphere or a civil society “safe” from state power because capitalism is a process that constitutes state power and hence cannot be separated from it. Wang now clearly affirms that the distinction between state and the economy/society does not hold either in the late Qing or in capitalist Europe. He expresses this point as a critique of Georg Lukacs’s position:

Lukacs traced the Marxist separation between the economy (base) and politics (superstructure) to a separation between economics and politics in capitalist society. But, as I see it, a more appropriate analysis would be: the separation between the economic base and the superstructure originates in the self-understanding of capitalist society.⁵⁵

Wang goes on to point out that, following the above analysis about planning and markets, one must conclude that capitalism’s self-understanding is flawed, since the state and the economy do not form separate realms. Rather, the nation-state system is the “political form” of modern capitalist society and the state is an internal element of the market.⁵⁶ On this understanding, capitalism is not just an economic structure that is based on private property and is separate from the state; rather it is a social dynamic that encompasses what we call state and society.

Hence, although twentieth-century Chinese state-building aimed at resisting imperialism, Wang claims that the process of Chinese nation- and state-building should not be simply considered as a resistance to capitalism. On the contrary, he suggests that socialist policies produced a type of capitalist society. In Wang’s words, “the practice of socialist societies originally was believed to be an escape

54 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 4: 1474. Wang then refers to the following passage from Hannah Arendt: “Individual appropriation of wealth will in the long run respect private property no more than socialization of the accumulation process. It is not an invention of Karl Marx but actually in the very nature of this society itself that privacy in every sense can only hinder the development of social “productivity” and that considerations of private ownership therefore should be overruled in favor of the ever-increasing process of social wealth.” Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 67.

55 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 4: 1485.

56 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 4: 1485.

from market society or capitalism, but in the end they only played the role of a specific political and economic form of market society.”⁵⁷

Wang does not choose sides on the question of whether Chinese modernity came from the inside or the outside, but stresses the role of Chinese bureaucrats and rulers, who since the late Qing have actively sought ways of competing in the world system of nation states. The quoted passage makes it clear that, despite his emphasis on transformations in the Song, we should be wary of labeling Wang a proponent of “alternative modernities,” since he constantly stresses the importance of the global capitalist system of nation states and hence global modernity. Note that Kang’s anti-modern modernity or anti-capitalist modernity refers to a future and is premised on the negation of the present world of global modernity.

Wang’s emphasis on global capitalist modernity is part of a larger argument to show that, despite the radical differences between the late Qing, China after 1949 (state socialism), and China today (market capitalism), at a higher level of abstraction we can see important structural similarities between these three societies. The three are part of a single process, in which different governments devised policies to allow China to compete in the global capitalist system of nation states.⁵⁸ Given that the nation-state system is the political form of capitalist society, it follows that as late Qing intellectuals became actively involved in the Qing dynasty project of building a nation state, they were also beginning to transform China into a capitalist society. For example, Wang explains that all of the transformations associated with the formation of the nation state, such as the expansion of cities and the establishment of a market, “increased the demand for free labor,”⁵⁹ which theorists as diverse as Moishe Postone, Ellen Wood, and Karl Polanyi would all see as a fundamental dimension of capitalism.

Unlike Nishi and Mizoguchi, Wang, perhaps echoing Song Confucians, sees more of a rupture between system and ideal in early twentieth-century thinkers.

57 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 4: 1475. This is a controversial issue and I will not go into the various debates about China, capitalism, and socialism. However, Wang’s main aim is to highlight the structural similarities between state socialism and capitalism. For example, in both cases workers are “freed” from the means of production and in both cases individuals are subject to an abstract social logic. On this point, Wang’s theory could be theoretically buttressed by Moishe Postone’s *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

58 Here Wang echoes Prasenjit Duara’s point: “In the early 20th century, regimes changed with amazing rapidity in the political landscape of China as well, at both the central and regional levels. But in North China, one of the most important aspects of state strengthening—the ability to penetrate and absorb the resources of local society—continued more or less uninterrupted during the entire period.” Duara, *Culture, Power and the State*, 3.

59 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 4: 1399.

From the perspective of political and economic systems, the Qing, the republican government, and the Communist state were all attempting, with varying success, to compete in the global capitalist system of nation states. Late Qing intellectuals were caught between understanding the necessity of entering the system of nation states and recognizing the unjustness of this system, often through recourse to traditional categories. Wang does not idealize the importance of late Qing intellectuals or claim that we should simply return to their concepts and ideas; rather his point is that their double movement in thought, namely both recognizing the necessity of participating in the global capitalist system and seeking ways to resist and eventually transcend it, has increasingly given way to a single vision in which the necessity of participating in the global capitalist system has also become the ideal, which thus makes it impossible to think of how to resist the domination associated with modern society.

However, one wishes that Wang had considered whether late Qing intellectuals' visions of post-capitalist utopia may have reproduced the logic of domination that Wang now uses them to criticize. At issue here is whether these thinkers were really able to posit an alternative to a world dominated by global capitalist modernity. When looking to the past to posit a vision for the future there is the constant danger of reproducing present or imminent forms of domination in a different guise. Marx recounted how various parties in France "accomplished the business of the day in Roman costumes and Roman phrases" but eventually unleashed "the consolidation of modern bourgeois society."⁶⁰

Wang has made a bold attempt to grasp both state socialism and Western liberal societies as shaped by the same logic of global capitalist modernity. Wang points out that we cannot understand the logic of capitalism as simply emphasizing the individual or the private, since capitalism also involves a process that subordinates the individual to a social dynamic. Kang Youwei's vision of the great community is one that is purely public and takes the private as an obstacle. Therefore, at a theoretical level, Kang's utopia might reproduce the social domination of capitalism in a post-national form. In short, Kang's ideal world seem to be precisely a world in which the individual becomes subordinate to the public, which Wang has shown is really an aspect of capitalist domination.

The late Qing revolutionary Zhang Taiyan (1869–1936) may be the one figure in Wang's book who understood the problem of social domination and argued against ideas such as the state and the general principle. Zhang developed concepts from Yogacara Buddhism to criticize the state and asserted that "the individual

60 Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *idem, Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 32.

entity is real and groups are illusory.”⁶¹ With this principle he argued against late Qing officials and intellectuals, including Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, and Kang Youwei, who sought to make use of the localities in order to extend state power. Moreover, Zhang saw the late Qing state-building project as intimately related to concepts such as the general principle. Thus he claimed that “the general principle constrains people more than the heavenly principle”⁶² because the former is linked to the patterns of social domination associated with modern forms of political and economic organization.

Although Zhang Taiyan begins by positing the individual against the state, society and, the general principle, Wang insightfully points out that the Buddhist and Daoist elements in Zhang’s thought should alert us to the differences between Zhang’s ideal and Western liberal individualism; according to both Buddhism and Daoism, ultimately the self is illusory. However, in his effort to save Zhang from a liberal interpretation, Wang risks rotating him back onto the collective side of the individual/community dichotomy. Wang ends his third part by stating that Zhang Taiyan supports a natural condition which is “public without a private dimension.”⁶³ Such an interpretation tends to vitiate Zhang’s (and Wang’s) critique of a social logic expressed as collectivity, and the problem of reproducing the dominating patterns of modern capitalism returns. So, in continuing Wang’s project of retrieving resources for the present, perhaps we should examine to what extent late Qing scholars such as Zhang help us to envision a world not organized around public and private and the other binary oppositions that structure modern life. For example, one could look at Zhang’s philosophy as drawing on China’s non-Confucian traditions such as Daoism and Buddhism to go beyond distinctions such as inner and outer or public and private.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Wang’s genealogy of modern Chinese thought responds to the intellectual crisis in contemporary China and revives the possibility of resistance to capitalist modernity through historical interpretation. Through historical analysis Wang not only uncovers resources that could be useful in envisioning a new future,

61 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 3: 1049; *idem*, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 1: 458.

62 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 1033; *idem*, *Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, 444.

63 Wang Hui, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang de xingqi*, 3: 1103.

64 This is a topic that goes beyond the scope of this essay. I deal with this topic in my forthcoming dissertation “The Myriad Things Emerge from Confusion: Religion and Radicalism in Zhang Taiyan’s Political Philosophy” (University of Chicago).

but also attempts to redefine China, by providing a narrative that shows the way in which previous thinkers imagined the Chinese nation in partial opposition to capitalist modernity. This is an extremely important gesture in contemporary China because Wang is one of the rare intellectuals who combine critical thought about modernity with serious reflection on tradition.

Wang's work deals with capitalist modernity as a global problematic, and the general maxim of Wang's book, namely to look for repressed resources to overcome capitalist modernity, reflects a trend that we can see in the West as well. For example, James Daly has written a book drawing on medieval Christian traditions to reformulate Marxism.⁶⁵ This is in some sense in line with Wang's comparison between Kang Youwei's Confucianism and the Western socialists' Christianity.

In addition to providing resources for the West's self-critique of capitalist modernity, Wang's genealogy of Chinese intellectual history shows the enormous empirical variety that the dominating structures of capitalist modernity can incorporate. In particular, Wang's discussion of capitalist modernity and socialism suggests that one cannot resist the dynamic of capitalism by emphasizing one side of the oppositions between public and private or individual and community. In this way, Wang's criticism of actually existing socialism and capitalism also applies to many neo-liberal and socialist attempts to retrieve resources from the past, since such attempts often reproduce the binary oppositions prevalent in capitalist modernity. This is to say that the narrative of Wang's book suggests a caveat to his maxim of searching for those aspects repressed by capitalist modernity: what appears to be repressed by capitalist modernity frequently turns out to be integral to it and resistance turns into reproduction.

To avoid this logic of resistance turning into reproduction, one must draw on the past in ways that undermine dominant dichotomies rather than affirm one side of a binary. Amy Hollywood's fascinating recent work points in this direction as she shows how twentieth-century post-structuralist theorists, such as Georges Bataille and Luce Irigaray, rely on the discourse of medieval female Christian mystics to subvert dominant conceptual patterns.⁶⁶ We find similar intimations in Wang's book, such as in his interpretation of the Daoist Guo Xiang and in aspects of his interpretation of Zhang Taiyan. At the same time, though, Wang's narrative constantly reminds us that the subversion of dominant conceptual oppositions must be coupled with a historical analysis that links

65 James Daly, *Deals and Ideals: Two Concepts of Enlightenment* (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2000).

66 Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

these binary oppositions to the logic of modernity, or at least shows the way in which the forms of capitalist modernity fundamentally transform previous modes of exclusion and oppression. Otherwise the emancipatory potential of such subversion will remain ineffectual and looking to the past may end up just being a subtle variation on Marx's Roman costumes. Thus Wang's book suggests that critical historians must seriously mine the past for alternative visions and reinscribe these alternatives in a sophisticated understanding of the present to open new possibilities. This second dimension is crucial. The historian's act of searching is always already embedded in present social and subjective forms, and it is precisely the act of critical or reflexive reinscription that may point to different possibilities for the future.⁶⁷

67 For a discussion of the concept of reflexivity in relation to Marxism see Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).