

Xu Jilin and the Thought Work of China's Public Intellectuals*

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ABSTRACT This article takes recent theoretical essays by Shanghai scholar and public intellectual, Xu Jilin, and other scholars of the history of thought and culture (*sixiang wenhua shi*) as a case study of efforts by intellectuals in the People's Republic of China to define and promote a role as public intellectuals separate from the party-state. This analysis suggests that political liberalism is used in such intellectual discourse to explain the social experience of intellectuals in China today and to promote a renewed public role for them. This public intellectual discourse is characterized by the continued privileging of *sixiang* (thought), by the naturalizing of foreign theories about liberalism, and by the use of such thought work to argue for a renewed public role for intellectuals as interpreters of public issues rather than as legislators of public values.

In September 2004, *Southern People Weekly* (*Nanfang renwu zhouban* 南方人物周刊) profiled 50 of China's top "public intellectuals" (*gonggong zhishifenzi* 公共知识分子). The list includes journalists, activists, artists and writers, legal specialists, and university scholars from the social sciences and humanities. This popular PRC journal defines public intellectuals as follows: "They have academic backgrounds and professional knowledge; they address and participate in public affairs; they maintain a critical spirit and moral ideals."¹ These are arguably the most influential people doing thought work in China today. Their writings address every conceivable contemporary issue, from US-China relations to AIDS to this week's news or popular film, in essays published in the popular print media and all conveniently accessible from inter-linked websites.² At the same time, some of them are engaged in public discussions of a reflexive nature. They debate a key question: "What should intellectuals do?" With the changing status of China's educated elite in the post-Mao and reform periods, this is not an idle question. If China's intellectuals are not to be

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1. "Yingxiang Zhongguo gonggong zhishifenzi 50 ren," *Nanfang renwu zhouban* (*Southern People Weekly*), September 2004, <http://business.sohu.com/s2004/zhishifenzi50.shtml> (accessed 15 November 2004). David Kelly gives a good assessment of this list and the political fall out it generated in autumn 2004, in "The importance of being public," *China Review*, No. 31 (2004-05), pp. 28-37.

2. For such websites, see *Nanfang renwu zhouban*, above, and *Shiji Zhongguo* (*Century China*) at <http://www.cc.org.cn>.

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propagandists for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or technocratic servants to an authoritarian state, then how will they find a public role? This study will show how one group of prominent intellectuals, scholars of “the history of thought and culture” (*sixiang wenhua shi* 思想文化史) in the PRC, addresses this issue. In particular it reviews the writings of a leading proponent of that circle, Xu Jilin (许纪霖), as they consider what an intellectual is and what intellectuals should do in China today.

Xu Jilin (b. 1957) is a noted scholar and writer on these issues and is one of the 50 public intellectuals profiled by *Southern People Weekly*.³ He is a professor of history at East China Normal University (*Huadong shifan daxue* 华东师范大学) in Shanghai and a leader of their Institute of Modern Chinese Thought and Culture Research (*Zhongguo xiandai sixiang wenhua yanjiusuo* 中国现代思想文化研究所). Beginning in the mid-1980s Xu started publishing on contemporary issues of modernization, ranging from the May Fourth Movement to contemporary events. Despite his formal training as a political scientist, he has chosen to write as a historian and is a leader of the Shanghai Historical Association. Xu Jilin’s essays, now numbering nearly a dozen volumes, focus on intellectuals and the history of Chinese thought in the 20th century.⁴ He has been at the centre of contemporary Chinese conversations about thought work and public intellectuals. For example, one of his more controversial recent commentaries was a reflection on what China’s response to the SARS crisis revealed about the weaknesses in China’s sense of national identity.⁵ In addition to his social commentaries, Xu has led

3. See for instance the entry on Xu Jilin in Edward L. Davis (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 685.

4. Xu Jilin published his first book on Huang Yanpei and Zhang Junmai in 1988 (*Wuqiong de kunhuo* (*Endless Perplexity*)) (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 1988)). His major books are: *Xunqiu yiyi: xiandaihua bianqian yu wenhua pipan* (*In Search of Meaning: Transformations of Modernization and Cultural Criticism*) (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 1997), *Ling yizhongde qimeng* (*Another Kind of Enlightenment*) (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1999), and (ed.), *Ershi shiji Zhongguo sixiang shilun* (*On the History of 20th-century Chinese Thought*), 2 vols. (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2000). He has numerous collections of essays, such as *Xu Jilin zixuan* (*Xu Jilin’s Own Selections*) (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 1999), which includes a catalogue of his main books and articles up to 1999, pp. 401–05, and a collection of *suibi* in the popular “Cultural Windows” book series (*renwen shichuang congshu*): Xu Jilin, *Xinshiji de sixiang ditu* (*Ideological Map for the New Century*) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2002). Xu writes extensively in mainland Chinese intellectual journals, such as *Dushu* (*Reading*) and *Ershiyi shiji* (*21st Century*) and maintains an active web presence. See his Chinese-language blog: http://www.blogchina.com/new/member/_%D0%ED%BC%CD%C1%D8 (accessed 15 August 2005). English translations of two essays by Xu Jilin are available in Gloria Davies, *Voicing Concerns: Contemporary Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), and Edward Gu and Merle Goldman (eds.), *Chinese Intellectuals Between State and Market* (London: Routledge, 2004).

5. Xu Jilin, “Cong Feidian weiji fansi minzu, shequn he gongmin yizhi” (“Reflections on the concepts of nationality, community and citizen after the SARS crisis”), first published on the website of *Shiji Zhongguo* (*Century China*) in May 2003 and later published in *Tianya* (*Frontiers*). Critical reaction to his essay can be found, as well, at the *Shiji Zhongguo* website.

discussions on the nature and role of intellectuals and on the possibility of a role for public intellectuals in China today.

One of the defining characteristics of this contemporary Chinese intellectual discourse on the role of intellectuals is the prominence of theory. Whether it is foreign and liberal or Confucian and authoritarian or harkening to some aspect of the official CCP ideology or one of the many mixes of all three, major debates, essays and scholars who fill the pages of China's blossoming print and web media since the early 1990s predominantly emphasize the significance of correct theory in conceptualizing, analysing and proposing the most effective solutions for China's problems today. As Gloria Davies notes, this discourse is both transnational, crossing linguistic borders by bringing into Chinese debate the likes of Jürgen Habermas, John Rawls and Anthony Giddens, and instrumental: "... Chinese critical discourse is primarily focused on applying general formulations derived from the Western mode of theorizing to the resolution of practical issues" in China.⁶ These debates, of course, most heavily feature intellectuals themselves – the producers and primary consumers of the discussions. However, their product – thought or ideology (*sixiang* 思想 in the parlance of the CCP and most Chinese scholars) – matters in politics as well as in culture. Joseph Fewsmith's study of think tanks and the Central Party School in Beijing underscores that "correct thought" (*zhengque sixiang* 正确思想), or ideology, has been crucial to political decisions by the CCP Central Committee in the reform period from the "truth controversy" of the late 1970s to the "three represents" of the current administration. He concludes, "... attention to ideological justification remains an important part of the decision-making process."⁷ This diverse range of intellectual effort – from academic studies to public commentary to commercial or government service – constitutes "thought work" (*sixiang gongzuo* 思想工作) in contemporary China.⁸

These discussions about thought work among contemporary Chinese intellectuals provide a window into the nature of intellectual discourse in China – about how they think and argue, as well as what they write about. The major finding of this study is that even among the most radical of the widely published Chinese intellectuals in the PRC, the so-called liberals, the discursive practices or mental tools they use show a fundamental continuity with earlier 20th-century

6. Gloria Davies, "Anticipating community, producing dissent: the politics of recent Chinese intellectual praxis," *The China Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2002), pp. 2–3.

7. Joseph Fewsmith, "Where do correct ideas come from? – The Party school, key think tanks, and the intellectuals," in David M. Finkelstein and Maryanne Kivlehan (eds.), *China's Leadership in the 21st Century: The Rise of the Fourth Generation* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), p. 154. This is the general thesis of Kalpana Misra's fine study, *From Post-Maoism to Post-Marxism: The Erosion of Official Ideology in Deng's China* (London: Routledge, 1998).

8. For a sense of the troubled history of such thought work, see Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and "Thought Work" in Reform China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Chinese thought. In particular, the Chinese liberals seek to find the source of correct thought as much as Mao Zedong famously did in his 1963 essay “Where do correct ideas come from?”⁹ Under very different conditions from Mao’s time and in search of different sorts of answers, Chinese intellectuals nevertheless carry on a search for correct thought. How does this search work today?

Three core characteristics of this thought work can be seen among contemporary academic intellectuals publishing in China. First, it continues to privilege thought, and particularly the search for correct thought, as the foundation of effective public policy. Thus, there is continuity as well as change in the Sinophone discourse of contemporary Chinese intellectuals.¹⁰ “Old habits” (the volatile mix of philosophical idealism, educational optimism, and the social pragmatism of Maoist, May Fourth and Confucian thinking) can be identified in contemporary Chinese intellectual discourse. This *habitus* assumes that *sixiang* paves the road to social solutions. At the same time, *habitus* provides the channels of change through which selective adaptation of foreign thought and discourse proceeds.¹¹ Through these cognitively familiar channels new sets of ideas, such as political liberalism, have been introduced to the centre of legal public discussion. This article focuses on the discussions of liberalism (*ziyouzhuyi* 自由主义) because it was politically vilified and suppressed under Mao and is now widely promoted by the United States and other Western leaders of globalization. Discussions of liberalism in China therefore form a useful case study of selective adaptation of a challenging foreign norm.

Secondly, thought work claims to naturalize foreign theory rather than to Sinify it. Thus, the similarity in discursive practice – the privileging of *sixiang* – between public debate in China today and under Mao spans a fundamental shift. Not only are the concrete solutions different – various forms of political liberalism or democratic socialism compared to various forms of Maoism

9. “Rende zhengque sixiang shi cong nali laide?” *Mao Zedong wenji* (*Writings of Mao Zedong*) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), Vol. 8, pp. 320–22, part of the “First Ten Points” draft on agricultural work of May 1963. Mao’s answer, of course, was that correct ideas come from social practice. In the Cultural Revolution correct thought took precedence over mere practice; see Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *The Cultural Revolution: China in Turmoil, 1966–1976* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, forthcoming).

10. Gloria Davies introduces the formulations “Sinophone” and “Anglophone” to distinguish the domains of two distinct scholarly traditions or realms of discourse in Chinese and English (though, more generally, one might use “Europhone” to indicate the range of Western academic studies in French, German and other languages). Her conceptualization is preferable to the typical distinction between “Chinese” and “Western” thought, because it accounts for the hybrid nature of publication of Chinese discourse inside and outside the PRC proper (especially on major websites) and of the participants in which numerous PRC intellectuals (and increasingly non-Chinese Sinologists) publish in both Chinese-language and English-language outlets. See Davies, *Voicing Concerns*, p. 2.

11. Pitman Potter develops a model of selective adaptation in the legal system in *The Chinese Legal System: Globalization and Local Legal Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002).

(Marxism-Leninism Mao Zedong Thought) – but there is also a fundamental shift in cultural stand that is of real importance in China's modern history. Most contemporary Chinese intellectuals do not attempt to Sinify foreign theory. Rather, they simply assume foreign theory might well be useful to their search for the best, most correct, ways to think about China's current problems. Unlike liberal intellectuals in the Republican era or Marxists of the Mao period they do not exhibit an overriding need to demonstrate the "equivalence" of Chinese and Western thought or theories.¹² Whether or not this attempt to treat Habermas or Hayek as unproblematically relevant to the analysis of contemporary China reflects a civilizational self-confidence among contemporary intellectuals or is a sign of utter post-colonial "colonization" is open to debate.¹³ The cultural identity of these public intellectuals, however, is clear. They are Chinese because they were born Chinese *and* live and work in the PRC and that identity does not require them to justify their use of Western theory on grounds other than utility.

Thirdly, it can be seen that Chinese intellectuals use thought work to make sense of the brave new world of globalizing China and to assert their status and role in it. This mix of an old intellectual practice (the privileging of thought) and a new content (ideas around political liberalism) has provided a voice for the new social status or circumstances of China's educated elite.¹⁴ On the one hand, intellectuals are now disestablished from the party-state, insecure of their influence in the commercialized, "fragmented authoritarian" public sphere of China since the 1990s, and on the other hand they are increasingly subject to the disciplines of academic professionalization. Politically disestablished and subject to new commercial and professional norms, these intellectuals search for a way to express who they are and what they can do in the public arena.

Contexts of Thought Work: Reform China and Western Studies of Intellectuals

This picture of the changing social role of China's intellectuals stems from major changes in China since 1979, but it also reflects changing approaches to the study of intellectuals. China's intellectuals

12. On earlier periods of "thought work" see Jerome Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China* (New York: The Free Press, 1981); Wen-hsin Yeh, "Discourses of dissent in post-imperial China," in William Kirby (ed.), *Realms of Freedom in Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 165–197; Stuart Schram has made the classic, and careful, study of Sinification. See Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 68 ff.

13. See, for example, Michelle Yeh, "International theory," in Rey Chow (ed.), *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 251–280.

14. One case study of this process, looking at the use of historical essays by public intellectuals in China, is given in Timothy Cheek, "Historians as public intellectuals in contemporary China," in Gu and Goldman, *Chinese Intellectuals Between State and Market*, pp. 204–222.

have long been a subject of international concern and scholarly attention.¹⁵ During the Cold War scholars in Western societies emphasized the role of intellectuals as opponents to the CCP, as part of what Richard Madsen has usefully identified as a “secondary common reference point” used to discuss the meaning of democracy, especially in America, in the context of the US-Soviet or capitalist-communist confrontation of those decades.¹⁶ These studies largely focused on intellectuals who were humanities scholars and creative writers; literature, as in Goldman’s signature work, *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, was the dominant area of intellectual resistance studied. By the 1980s, particularly after the re-opening of China to Western scholars in the mid-1970s, the picture in Western research became more complicated. Focus moved to establishment intellectuals who worked for the CCP but who at the same time clearly demonstrated efforts at reform, resistance and dissent. Fields of intellectual activity studied expanded to include administrative service, inner-Party debates, academic work and science.¹⁷

By the 1990s the old picture of China’s intellectuals as fundamentally defined by their relationship to the party-state – whether as “democratic dissidents” or “establishment intellectuals” – no longer explained matters for Western or Chinese readers. The profound social changes of the reform era, particularly since Deng Xiaoping’s reaffirmation of opening to the world and marketization in his famed southern tour in 1992, have created a new world for both China’s intellectuals and the party-state.¹⁸ In the past decade, scholars inside and outside China have struggled to make sense of these social changes and of the changing position of China’s intellectuals in what is variously called “globalizing China,” “postmodern China” or

15. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Chinese Intellectuals* (New York: Praeger, 1960), Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), T.A. Hsia, *Gates of Darkness* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971).

16. Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 211; Merle Goldman’s many studies are a major but not unusual representative of these studies. See, for example, Roderick MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution: I* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1974); Peter R. Moody, *Opposition and Dissent in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1977); Merle Goldman, *China’s Intellectuals: Advise and Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

17. Carol Lee Hamrin and Timothy Cheek (eds.), *China’s Establishment Intellectuals* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1986); Merle Goldman, Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin (eds.), *China’s Intellectuals and the State: The Search for a New Relationship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Council on East Asian Studies, 1987); Bill Brugger and David A. Kelly, *Chinese Marxism in the Post-Mao Era, 1978–94* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). Lyman H. Miller, *Science and Dissent in Post-Mao China: The Politics of Knowledge* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996). Even studies of literature shifted to a more complex view that acknowledged the embeddedness of “politically active intellectuals” in China’s party-state; see Bonnie S. McDougall (ed.), *Chinese Popular Literature and Performing Arts in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

18. Misra, *From Post-Maoism to Post-Marxism*; Joseph Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

market socialism with Chinese characteristics.¹⁹ If the key relationship for intellectuals is not with the state, then what is it? Some have argued it is the market or commercialized popular culture; others stress academic professionalization; and others mention the centrality of China's national identity and nationalism for intellectuals.²⁰ So much seems to have changed for China's intellectuals since the time of Mao – broader contact with the outside world (by travel and by satellite TV and internet), frequent interaction with Western scholars abroad and in China, less Party ideological interference in daily life, and a dizzying array of commercial opportunities – that some wonder if the socialist past is relevant at all. Nevertheless, the CCP remains the ruling Party, China is not a liberal democracy, and the Party can and does come down hard on public criticism or activities it finds threatening.²¹

Recent studies now stress the disaggregation of both the party-state and intellectuals. Neither is the monolithic bloc that appeared in the Mao period. Lieberthal and Lampton have theorized the “fragmented authoritarianism” of the reform party-state. Scholars of intellectual life in China have likewise acknowledged that professional academics do not necessarily identify with creative writers or government advisors or public intellectuals.²² Both ideology and social life have “pluralized” (*duoyuanhua* 多元化).

The broader social, economic and political changes since Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992 in support of further marketization and opening to the West are well known.²³ The two central forces with which China's public intellectuals have to deal today are commercialization and professionalization – fundamental changes in their conditions of employment. The impact of commercialization on literary production has been the demise of serious literature and the rise of a range of popular media.²⁴ The impact of professionalization

19. Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Shiping Hua, *Scientism and Humanism in Post-Mao China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Centre, 2002).

20. Gu and Goldman, *China's Intellectuals Between State and Market*; Xudong Zhang (ed.), *Whither China? Intellectual Politics in Contemporary China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Zhidong Hao, *Intellectuals at a Crossroads: The Changing Politics of China's Knowledge Workers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003); Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State By Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

21. Daniel C. Lynch, “Dilemmas of ‘thought work’ in *fin de siècle* China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 157 (1999), pp. 173–201. Merle Goldman, “Politically-engaged intellectuals in the 1990s,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 159 (1999), pp. 700–711. Kelly, “The importance of being public.”

22. Kenneth Lieberthal and David M. Lampton (eds.), *Bureaucracy, Politics and Decision Making in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); on intellectuals, see studies cited above.

23. See, for example, Fewsmith, *China Since Tiananmen*; Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (eds.), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict, and Resistance*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).

24. See the essays in Perry and Selden, *Chinese Society*, and especially Shuyu Kong, *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

in the 1990s is clear as more top intellectuals find their social niche in China's key-point universities and Academies of Social Science (both central and in the regions) with strong certification in terms of international norms of academia.²⁵ This professionalization has a distinct global, or Western, character. The norms come from Euro-American institutions and practices, as embraced widely around the world and by China's government and major universities.²⁶

However, professions, universities and publishing in China do not correspond fully to Western institutions. Educated elites in the PRC of Mao Zedong's time were cadres (*ganbu* 干部) in units administered by the party-state,²⁷ and the relative autonomy of universities in post-Mao China has not created full intellectual or professional freedom: there are still political controls which the CCP can and does enforce.²⁸ Furthermore, there are other ways for educated Chinese today to do well in life and to have an impact on society: as entrepreneurs, politicians, creative writers and artists (and the relationship between, say, a novelist and an intellectual in China is as contested as it is in various Western societies).²⁹ Eddy U, for example, makes a good case for the necessity of studying non-elite intellectuals.³⁰ This study, however, focuses on "intellectual culture" reflected in the discourse of academic intellectuals in China concerned with public issues as a contribution to a broader understanding of intellectual life and politics in China.³¹

The field of intellectual history in the Chinese academic setting exemplifies that intellectual culture. Over recent decades there has

25. By far the best study on professionalization among Chinese intellectuals is Hao's *Intellectuals at a Crossroads*, esp. pp. 205–260. Hao provides a strong empirical base for his analysis of Chinese intellectuals in terms of critical, professional (bourgeoisified), and organic social roles.

26. A classic statement on the definition of professionalization as specialized and institutionalized education, formation of professional associations, and a defined ethical code, is given in Howard M. Vollmer and Donald M. Mills, *Professionalization* (London: Prentice Hall, 1966). On Chinese experience in the Republican period see Xiaoqun Xu, *Chinese Professionals and the Republican State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). A consideration of the 1980s is given in Gu Xin, "From intellectuals to technocrats: the formation and development of Chinese reformist think-tanks in the 1980s," *Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 8 (1997), pp. 89–135.

27. Universities, for example, were part of the Education and Propaganda *xitong* of the Party. See Hao, *Intellectuals at a Crossroads*, pp. 73–117; Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

28. Lynch, "Dilemmas of 'thought work'"; Goldman, "Politically-engaged intellectuals."

29. Xiuwu R. Liu provides a nice case study in *Jumping into the Sea: From Academics to Entrepreneurs in South China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

30. Eddy U, "The making of *zhishifenzi*: the critical impact of the registration of unemployed intellectuals in the early PRC," *The China Quarterly*, No. 173 (2003). Zhidong Hao's study, of course, gives full attention to the range of roles for the educated in China, *Intellectuals at a Crossroads*.

31. This approach also draws from Thomas Bender, who calls these communities of discourse "cultures of intellectual life." See Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the US* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), p. 3.

emerged in the PRC an interest in intellectual history that is known as history of thought (*sixiang shi* 思想史). It is also sometimes called *sixiang wenhua shi* (history of thought and culture). While there have been studies of thought and culture in Chinese historiography since at least the Han Dynasty and modern Chinese scholars from Liang Qichao to Chen Yinke have pondered the thought of Qing scholars and the ideology of Buddhism, still the prominence of specifically *sixiang shi* in the post-Mao period is notable. Li Zehou's (李泽厚) three volumes published by 1987 are well known.³² Wang Hui (王晖) attempts a similar project in his four-volume, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, starting from the Song rather than the pre-Qin.³³ More significantly, the *sixiang shi* project is being institutionalized in the PRC at various major universities, such as Qinghua in Beijing and East China Normal University in Shanghai. At the latter school, Xu Jilin is part of an Institute of Modern Chinese Thought and Culture Research that publishes several book series on the topic.³⁴ Finally, there continue to appear PRC academic studies with titles such as *Ershi shiji Zhongguo sixiang shi* (二十世纪中国思想史, *History of 20th-Century Chinese Thought*) or on specific topics, such as *Zhishifenzi yinggai gan shenma?* (知识分子应该干什么?, *What Should Intellectuals Do?*), which gives the thinking on this question by scholars across the century from Lu Xun (鲁迅) and Hu Shi (胡适) to Yu Yingshi (余英时) and even the widely popular but academically disparaged Yu Jie (余杰).³⁵

When Xu Jilin and his colleagues write to their fellow academics in Sinophone discourse they adopt the voice of the professional academic, drawing from formal social sciences, historiography, philosophy and critical theory. While the audience is educated (and most often academics), such complex writings are aimed at those

32. Li Zehou, *Zhongguo gudai sixiang* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1986); the *jindai* volume was published also by Renmin in 1979, but *Zhongguo xiandai sixiangshi* appeared by Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1987.

33. Wang Hui, *Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004). See also Wang Hui, "Fire at the castle gate," *New Left Review*, No. 6 (2000), p. 90. Wang Hui's take on "the social movement of 1989" and intellectual debates in China in the 1990s has recently appeared in English as *China's New Order*, edited by Theodore Huters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

34. The ECNU Institute, Huadong shifan daxue, *Zhongguo xiandai sixiang wenhua yanjiusuo*, is a key-point university and centrally funded research institute under the Chinese Ministry of Education. Its website can be found at <http://chinese-thought.unix-vip.cn4e.com/>. A similar institute run by Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng at the Chinese University of Hong Kong is the *Dangdai Zhongguo wenhua zhongxin* (Research Centre for Contemporary China). Their website is <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ics/rcccc/>. Both organizations hold regular international conferences on intellectual history with resulting publications that are announced on their websites. The product of a recent conference by ECNU's Institute is Xu Jilin (ed.), *Gonggongxing yu gonggong zhishifenzi* (*Public-ness and Public Intellectuals*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin chubanshe, 2003).

35. Xu Jilin (ed.), *Ershi shiji Zhongguo sixiang shi* (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 2000); Zhu Yong (ed.), *Zhishifenzi yinggai ganshenma?* (*What Should Intellectuals Do?*) (Beijing: Shishi chubanshe, 1999).

interested in doing the work of public intellectuals.³⁶ Thus, Xu's long analytical pieces are not published in *Historical Research* (*Lishi yanjiu* 历史研究), the premier academic journal in Beijing; rather they appear in the popular highbrow intellectual journals such as *Dushu* (读书, *Reading*), *Dongfang* (东方, *The Eastern*), and *Kaifang shidai* (开放时代, *Open Times*), as well as in influential Hong Kong journals such as *Ershiyi shiji* (二十一世纪, *21st Century*) which has a widely read web version. Some of these essays by Xu Jilin do the thought work of public intellectuals: they set out to discover the universal code that will interpret what Xu sees as semi-autistic intellectual "communities" (such as the so-called "new left" and "liberals") in China's postmodern society and return intellectuals to their lost central role in public life.³⁷

Defining Zhishifenzi (知识分子): What is an "Intellectual"?

Unsurprisingly, the first issue of concern for Chinese public intellectuals is their identity: what is a *zhishifenzi* (intellectual)? The current role for China's educated elite is as professionals. In the language of recent PRC intellectual essays, they are: academics (*xuezhe* 学者), readers (*dushuren* 读书人) and professors (*jiaoshou* 教授), and outside the academy, writers (*zuojia* 作家), various experts (*zhuanjia* 专家) and now the new role of "media stars" (*meiti xing* 媒体星). Yet *zhishifenzi* remains in common use. What do China's scholars mean by the term? Most scholars writing outside China agree with something close to the formulation offered by He Baogang in his English-language review of Chinese ideas of the intellectual: "An intellectual is one who commands knowledge and cultural symbols and who is able to use reason to go beyond the restrictions of his or her family, class, and locality." To that generic offering, He Baogang adds that the Chinese intellectual "has a mission to defend and develop the *dao*."³⁸ He cites Wang Yuanhua (王元化), the noted editor of *Xin qimeng* (新启蒙, *New Enlightenment*), for a contemporary expression of Confucian courage: "The life of theory lies in courage and sincerity; theory does not bow to power or flatter anybody."³⁹

36. Xu Jilin distinguishes between "professionalized" (*zhuan yehua*) and commercialized or media (*meiti*) intellectuals and public intellectuals (who fit to the definition given by *Southern People Weekly*, above) in his essay, "Gonggong zhishifenzi ruhe keneng" ("How public intellectuals can be possible"), *Zhongguo zhishifenzi shilun* (*Ten Essays on China's Intellectuals*) (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2003), pp. 33–78.

37. Jing Wang identifies Xu and Wang Ning as leaders in this project of recovery in the 1990s. See *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 265.

38. He Baogang, "Chinese intellectuals facing the challenges of the new century," in Gu and Goldman, *Chinese Intellectuals Between State and Market*, p. 263. He teaches in Australia. This general definition with Chinese additions pretty much parallels the definition (based on Shils' entry in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968) that Hamrin and Cheek adopted in *China's Establishment Intellectuals*, p. 4.

39. He, *ibid.*, citing from Merle Goldman, *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy*, p. 285. Wang Yuanhua is a noted senior scholar in China whose return to an interest in

Scholars in the PRC writing in Chinese attend to this question in a similar fashion. Arguing over what is an intellectual seems to be almost a national sport on university campuses in China. Zhu Yong (祝勇), in the preface to *What Should Intellectuals Do?*, gives an account to which most of his colleagues in Beijing would subscribe. "Intellectuals in the modern sense only made their appearance in China recently, following the eastward flow of Western learning, the opening of China, the entry of Western scholarly disciplines (*xifang xueke* 西方学科), and the abandonment of the imperial exams, all of which began the transformation of the knowledge community of traditional 'scholars' (*quantong de 'shi' de zhishi qunti* 传统的士的知识群体)."⁴⁰ Intellectuals as such begin with May Fourth, Zhu Yong proposes, though he notes Lu Xun still used the title "On the knowledge class" (*Guanyu zhishi jieji* 关于知识阶级) for an essay in 1927. Apparently the formulation (*tifa* 提法) "intellectual" was not common even then. Zhu concludes intellectuals are distinct from traditional *shi* while nevertheless maintaining "thousands of connections" with *shi* traditions. This heritage, Zhu states, defines the specific character and fate of China's intellectuals.

Xu Jilin's account of what defines intellectuals is a good example of thought work among contemporary Chinese intellectuals. Xu follows his own distinction between two kinds of scholarly knowledge: experience (*jingyan* 经验) and formal (*guifan* 规范) reasoning.⁴¹ The former is largely historical and concrete; the latter more theoretical and abstract. Both, according to Xu, should contribute to practical advice on what intellectuals should do today. We shall see, below, that Xu's definition of what intellectuals *are* is an example of the experiential knowledge (history) and his use of philosophy in the analysis of what intellectuals should *do* is an example of the formal knowledge, and together these constitute what he would consider to be a proper formal demonstration for public intellectuals.

Xu Jilin gives his most extended account on public intellectuals in the preface to his 1999 book, *Another Kind of Enlightenment*.⁴² He begins his review of the experience of intellectuals with the sound point (and cites Wittgenstein for support) that the precise meaning of any word, and here "intellectual," can only emerge from a concrete discursive realm (*yujing* 语境). In a fashion that is characteristic of contemporary Chinese intellectual and academic debate, Xu proceeds

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Confucian values has prompted criticism of turning his back on May Fourth enlightenment ideals. Xu Jilin defends Wang Yuanhua's project as "another kind of enlightenment" in Xu Jilin, *Ling yizhong qimeng* (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1999), pp. 325–28.

40. Zhu Yong, "Xu" (preface), in *Zhishifenzi yingai gan shenma?*, pp. 1–2; the entire preface is a meditation on definitional questions, pp. 1–6. Zhu Yong is an essayist on intellectual and cultural topics and an editor at Current Affairs Press, Beijing.

41. Xu Jilin, "Liangzhong ziyou he minzhu."

42. Xu Jilin, "Zi xu," in *Ling yizhong qimeng*, pp. 1–26.

to make his Chinese point with foreign examples. He notes the relatively new vintage of the core word, “intelligentsia” from late 19th-century Russia (and prints it in Cyrillic) and then walks the reader through a century of examples. Xu concludes:

Thus, the modern meaning of intellectual points to that group of cultured people (*wenhuaren* 文化人) who with an independent status and relying on the strength of knowledge and spirit (*jingshen* 精神) express a fervent public concern towards society and embody a sort of public conscience (*gonggong liangzhi* 公共良知) and spirit (*yishi* 意识) of public participation. In this sense, intellectuals are very different from ordinary technical specialists (*jishu zhuanjia* 技术专家), technical bureaucrats (*jishu guanliao* 技术官僚) and professional scholars (*zhiyexing xuezhe* 职业性学者).⁴³

Xu comes to his two key points – the plurality of intellectual types and the core definition of intellectuals as distinct from “technical” types and “professional scholars” – by a fascinating tour of a century’s worth of experience from Russia, France, England and Germany.

This 25-page essay, which Xu presents as “pulling together my thinking on intellectuals in a fairly systematic way,”⁴⁴ hardly mentions anyone Chinese until the last few pages. Even there, he raises a half-dozen Chinese scholars as examples of the types he has enumerated – from Gu Zhun (顾准) to Chen Yinke (陈寅恪) – somewhat in the spirit of “think globally, act locally.” One cannot help but conclude that Xu believes that his core examples are potentially relevant to Chinese who wish to be intellectuals today, regardless of their Western provenance. The key here is not only that Xu privileges Western theory and examples, but that he sees no need to “Sinify” these examples: “Chinese-ness” appears to be a non-issue. This is an example of the naturalization of foreign theory.

Xu’s review of European intellectual types presents his Chinese readers with an array of concrete personae of varying intellectual identities, roles and relationships to social institutions. The Russians provide a model of intense moral sense and alienated consciousness developed from their background in Eastern Orthodoxy and their run-ins with the Tsarist state. The French intellectuals exhibit a self-assured social conscience (*shehui liangzhi* 社会良知) with clever lines, coffee-shop patter and impressive political posturing. The English intellectuals are professors who would like to make a difference within the system with their well-known economism and conservative liberalism. The Germans are the romantic nationalists who praise the *volk* and seek “freedom of the innermost being” (*neixin de ziyou* 内心的自由).⁴⁵

Richard Madsen has rightly pointed out that most popular and much scholarly writing in America treats China as a “secondary reference point” – that is, it uses China as a metaphor to talk about

43. *Ibid.* p. 3.

44. *Ibid.* p. 1.

45. *Ibid.* pp. 1–4.

America and its own issues of identity and purpose.⁴⁶ This applies equally to Sinophone discourse. Xu Jilin is quite straightforward about this instrumental nature of his review: he's interested in finding the proper role for intellectuals in China today, not recreating the subjective experience of Russian *narodniki* or French existentialists. Indeed, the next part of his historical narration is a structural account of the dis-establishment of 1980s intellectuals in China by the dual forces of political marginalization and market subordination. These, combined with Xu's third factor, the challenge of postmodernity, complete his picture of China's intellectuals in the 1990s as politically and economically marginalized, captured by the discourse circles of their professions, and lacking a common language with which to analyse public issues.⁴⁷

What Should Public Intellectuals Do?

The second step in Xu Jilin's analysis of intellectuals is a formal analysis of the place and public role of China's intellectuals in contemporary society – what they should *do*. Here Xu seeks to apply a philosophical analysis to the historical conditions he has briefly recounted. He wants to understand *why* intellectuals are marginalized and professionalized and, more importantly, *how* they can recreate and make use of a “public character” (*gonggong xing* 公共性). This effort is almost entirely carried out in a Sinophone discourse of Lyotard, Bordieu, Foucault and, perhaps less well known, Zygmunt Bauman. Towards the end of the analysis, and seamlessly, Xu pulls together the threads using the formulations of the well-known senior Chinese historian Wang Yuanhua. It is clear here that any concern about Western versus Chinese theorists is not Xu Jilin's.

Xu Jilin favours the formulations of two scholars for framing his argument: Zygmunt Bauman's image of intellectuals as either “legislators” or “interpreters,” and Wang Yuanhua's distinction between “scholarly thinking” (*youxueshude sixiang* 有学术的思想) with the example of Gu Zhun and “thoughtful scholarship” (*yousixiangde xueshu* 有思想的学术) with the example of Chen Yinke. What these two kinds of public intellectuals are and can do is framed by Xu's analysis between Bauman's formal models and Wang's concrete examples. Postmodernity (*houxiandaixing* 后现代性) is key to this analysis. Xu sees China's postmodern society as deeply fragmented, in which the common ideological platform of the 1980s has crumbled. Instead, and this lies at the root of Xu's analysis of the vitriolic debates between “new left” and “liberal” intellectuals in the 1990s,⁴⁸ even though scholars have “cultural capital” (per Bordieu)

46. Madsen, *China and the American Dream*, p. 211.

47. Xu Jilin, “Zi xu,” pp. 9–13.

48. See, Xu Jilin, Liu Qing, Luo Gang and Xue Yi, “In search of a ‘third way’: a conversation regarding ‘liberalism’ and the ‘new left wing,’” in Davies, *Voicing Concerns*, pp. 199–226, and Xu Jilin, “The fate of an enlightenment: 20 years in the

they are locked into warring discourse communities that mutually disdain each other and have incommensurate criteria for argument and proof. These communities (*gongtongti* 共同体) are for Xu none other than the well-known *pai* (派) of intellectual debates in China today: the “national studies,” “enlightenment,” “postmodern,” “liberalism” and “new left” groups.⁴⁹

In this fragmented and pluralistic society what is missing is a discourse that reflects, acknowledges and engages this diversity. Xu bemoans the out-of-date “legislator” mentality of China’s intellectuals. They fail to address the “interpretive” needs of society precisely because “they only speak within their community with the habit of those 1980s ‘legislators’ and have not become used to speaking across to different communities by translating their community’s language (*yuyan* 语言) into a ‘public’ (*gonggongde* 公共的) language.”⁵⁰ This is the nub of Xu’s argument: intellectuals must create a “public” by devising a language of translations – a *discourse* – among increasingly differentiated social groups, not to mention factionalized intellectual groups. A fair amount of Xu’s work in the past few years has been the search for the rules for such a discourse that can govern the conversation between independent communities in a plural society, and so provide intellectuals with a productive role in public debate.⁵¹

In a later essay, “Two kinds of liberalism and democracy,” Xu Jilin sets out to identify the fundamental logic for the thought work of public intellectuals.⁵² He begins by taking on the method of John

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Chinese intellectual sphere (1978–98),” translated by Geremie R. Barmé and Gloria Davies, in Gu and Goldman, *Chinese Intellectuals Between State and Market*, pp. 183–203. This is a translation of “Qimeng de mingyun,” in Xu, *Ling yizhong qimeng*, pp. 250–268. Xu’s version of the debates is largely accepted by Geremie Barmé in “The revolution of resistance,” in Perry and Selden, *Chinese Society*, pp. 198–220. Xudong Zhang, on the other hand, sees the debate more from the “new left” perspective associated with Wang Hui. See Zhang’s *tour de force* survey, “The making of the post-Tiananmen intellectual field: a critical overview,” in Xudong Zhang, *Whither China?* pp. 1–75.

49. Xu Jilin, “Zi xu,” p. 15. These have been analysed in recent Anglophone studies, such as Xudong Zhang, “Postmodern and postsocialist society: cultural politics in China in the 1990s,” *New Left Review*, No. 237 (1999), pp. 77–105; Geremie Barmé, “The revolution of resistance”; and Kalpana Misra, “Neo-left and neo-right in post Tiananmen China,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 43, No. 5 (2003), pp. 717–744.

50. Xu Jilin, “Zi xu,” p. 17.

51. Xu Jilin is by no means alone in this effort. Qin Hui has been searching for what he calls “common baseline” values, such as “freedom” and a commitment to practical solutions for pressing social problems (*wenti*) over systematic theory (*zhuyi*). See Qin’s essays in David Kelly (ed. and trans.), *The Chinese Economy*, Vol. 38, No. 6 (2005).

52. Xu Jilin, “Liangzhong ziyou he minzhu: dui ‘ziyouzhuyi’ yu ‘xinzuopai’ lunzhan de fansi” (“Two kinds of liberty and democracy: reflections on the debate between ‘liberalism’ and ‘new left’”), paper given at the conference, “China’s Intellectuals and Social Power,” Colorado College, October 2001. A version was published in *Ershiyi shiji*, No. 68 (2001), pp. 15–19. A longer version of the title appears in Luo Gang (ed.), *Sixiang wenxuan (Selected Essays on Thought)* (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004), pp. 318–370. Presumably Xu’s preferred version appears on his

Rawls' "reflective equilibrium" as the standard for identifying and judging what can contribute to a common philosophical language for settling these social questions.⁵³ Xu defines this operationally as the need to balance general formal proof (*pubianxingde guifan lunzheng* 普遍性的规范论证) and experiential moral intuition (*jingyanxingde daode zhijue* 经验性的道德知觉). A sound form of thought that hopes to provide the language to bridge the gap between China's "liberals" and "new left" (and other disparate intellectual communities) must satisfy both the formal and experiential criteria Xu sees in Rawls' "reflective equilibrium."⁵⁴

The pragmatic purposes of this exercise in formal analysis are clear. First, Xu wishes to get beyond the "spit fight" (*koushui zhan* 口水战) between advocates of "liberalism" and "new left" in the PRC intellectual press (including the major web-based journals).⁵⁵ The move Xu makes here is to shift from personalities to concepts. Individual scholars and writers are not his focus.⁵⁶ Secondly, his goal is to suggest an alternative to these two camps. In the end he tentatively proposes a "third way" that seeks to combine the strengths of liberalism and republicanism (liberty of the moderns and liberty of the ancients) as well as the justice (or fairness criteria) of Rawls' philosophy with the legitimacy of the "deliberative democracy" favoured by Habermas. Xu's rhetorical strategy of setting himself up as the "reasonable middle ground" is, of course, open to investigation.

The steps of Xu's argument are detailed, reasonable and lengthy. In summary, they include an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of negative and positive liberty per Isaiah Berlin, drawing Benjamin Constant's distinction between the liberty of the ancients and the liberty of the moderns. This takes us through Greek experience to the weakness of negative liberty as a tool for authoritarian states today (Xu gives the example of Singapore). He also turns to John Gray's *Liberalism* (Taiwan translation of 1991) to emphasize that liberalism has no necessary link to democracy.

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"spot" on the ECNU Institute's web journal, *Si yu wen wangkan*, at <http://chinese-thought.unix-vip.cn4e.com/>. As the web version is unpaginated, citations are taken from the conference paper version.

53. In Rawls' own words his goal is to find out: "how is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?" in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, new edition, 1996), p. 4. Rawls defines "reflective equilibrium" in his *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 48–51 and returns to it in his *Political Liberalism*, p. 8.

54. Xu, "Liang zhong ziyou he minzhu," ms. p. 2.

55. For a colourful account of intellectual in-fighting in contemporary China, see Geremie R. Barmé and Gloria Davies, "Have we been noticed yet? Intellectual contestation and the Chinese web," in Gu and Goldman, *China's Intellectuals Between State and Market*, pp. 75–108.

56. In this 36 pp. essay individuals generally only come up as cited authors in one of the 112 endnotes.

This brings Xu to a consideration of two kinds of democracy: direct and indirect, or liberal democracy and republican democracy, or the traditions of Locke-Hayek and Rousseau-Marx. This is the heart of the essay and has many steps (in which the Sinophone reader meets Weber on legitimacy, Hannah Arendt on participation and Habermas on deliberative democracy).⁵⁷ Our concern here is how Xu uses this rich set of concepts and arguments to pursue his pragmatic goals, most notably to persuade his warring colleagues in the “liberal” and “new left” camps to come to terms and work together on the second and more important goal: articulating a way to communicate on public issues and then to work on the question they share with not only Rawls but with all public intellectuals – how to promote the good society? “The problem is,” Xu concludes midway in his long theory essay, “‘liberals’ and ‘leftists’ seem to believe that their preferred version of democracy can be the only correct one” and so they dismiss all others.⁵⁸ However, through his account of the intellectual lineage of both the indirect democracy favoured by liberals and the direct democracy favoured by the new left, Xu argues each version is a necessary but not sufficient component in a complete model of democracy – one that can deliver justice that is socially legitimate.

Xu’s formal analysis contains a continuing concern for correct thought in China’s pluralized intellectual worlds, with its attendant naturalization of foreign theory. This is part of the inheritance of Chinese socialist thought – via a process of ideological “dismemberment” from the end of the Mao period and reconstitution and recombination in the current period.⁵⁹ The result is a mix, or a synthesis, of its disparate and logically incompatible parts (such as political liberalism and Marxist-Leninist thought). It thus constitutes another example of the “selective adaptation” process identified by Pitman Potter. In this case foreign liberal theory is fitted into the ideological imperatives – the intellectual culture – of a now-defunct Chinese Marxist-Leninist ideological orthodoxy that requires correct ideas, but now in the service of fundamentally new challenges in reform China.

Characteristics of Contemporary Thought Work

Xu Jilin’s writings on intellectuals provide a window into the world of Chinese academics interested in finding the best use of theory for public affairs. His work, and that of his like-minded colleagues,⁶⁰ by

57. *Ibid.* pp. 10–18.

58. *Ibid.* p. 9.

59. As predicted by David Kelly in “Chinese Marxism since Tiananmen: between evaporation and dismemberment,” in David S. G. Goodman and Gerald Segel (eds.), *China in the Nineties: Crisis Management and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 19–34.

60. There are, of course, several other leading interpreters of liberalism in China. Previously, Liu Junning was influential; see Goldman, “Politically-engaged intellectuals in the 1990s.” Currently, Qin Hui is among the most prominent; see citations

no means defines contemporary intellectual practice in China today; there is a healthy range of different voices – from Party loyalists to radical dissidents.⁶¹ However, the public intellectual practice represented by Xu Jilin is a key part of that broader intellectual world, and the characteristics of contemporary Chinese thought work reflected in Xu's example appear to be broadly shared by his colleagues, regardless of their different opinions or solutions.

This intellectual work is done in long essays that are both abstract in form and pragmatic in intent.⁶² This academic style is not new in China; it was the norm for left-wing writers and scholars under the Kuomintang in the 1930s.⁶³ But why do it this way today? Xu Jilin echoes what other Chinese critics have said: it is the only way to deal with the fallout of Tiananmen and keep your job in the PRC. In a 1995 essay, Xu addresses the challenge of “the Tiananmen Incident of 1989” explicitly: “In ideological terms, we need to ask what, ultimately, is the mode of discourse that standardizes the mode of thinking and course of action in Chinese society from top to bottom” that contributed to the fiasco. However, Xu quickly adds that “within the discursive domain of the mainland, this kind of inquiry can only proceed by means of being converted into some kind of historical awareness or couched in the terms of abstract academic language.”⁶⁴ Gloria Davies aptly concludes: “The relation between language and power inscribed here is one over which actual political repression casts a very long shadow.” So, one major source of such abstract writing is political common sense.

Despite their dis-establishment from the party-state, China's public intellectuals still look for correct *sixiang* to solve today's problems. Much as Marxism-Leninism did in the 1920s and 1930s, Western theories in the 1990s appear to underwrite the most successful social systems in the contemporary world – that is, they pass the intellectual

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above and his article-interview, “Dividing the big family assets,” in *New Left Review*, No. 20 (2003), pp. 83–110. Xu Youyu is another prominent PRC academic commentator who is engaged by US-based philosopher Xiao Yang in a helpful set of essays and translations in *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2003).

61. Fewsmith, “Where do correct ideas come from?”; Wang, *One China, Many Paths*.

62. For example, see the papers from a 2002 ECNU conference on public intellectuals in Xu Jilin (ed.), *Gonggongxing yu gonggong zhishifenzi (The Public and Public Intellectuals)* (Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2003). Davies sensitively analyses this academic style in *Voicing Concerns*, esp. pp. 27 and 37 and in Davies, “Anticipating community,” pp. 2–3.

63. For the general context, including these political concerns, see Michel Hockx, *Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); also Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State*.

64. Xu Jilin, “Bi piping geng zhongyao de shi lijie” (“To understand is more important than to criticize”), *Ershiyi shiji*, No. 29 (1995), p. 132 as translated by Gloria Davies, *Voicing Concerns*, p. 35.

pragmatism test.⁶⁵ Ironically, Mao Zedong's sinification of Marxism-Leninism (and Party practice over the decades) succeeded by the 1990s in making that ideology appear both Chinese *and* inapplicable to today's problems. China's establishment intellectuals had begun to try out Western theorists, such as Weber, in the 1980s, but the wholesale disregard of the socialist pantheon of thinkers and the equivalent privileging of Western theorists – admittedly ranging from conservatives to liberals to leftists – marks the intellectual life of China from 1992.⁶⁶

In these writings Chinese academics do not wish to “become like the West” in any simple sense. Indeed, there is a range of approaches to foreign theory among China's intellectuals today. Liu Dong (刘东) in his noted essay, “Perils of ‘designer pidgin scholarship’,” calls for “an eventual development of Chinese theory after careful mastering of Western masters.” His model is the now-famous Chinese scholar of the Republican period, Chen Yinke, whom he quotes: “Those who are truly able to develop their own independent system of ideas and who have creatively accomplished this, must absorb and import foreign learning on the one hand while bearing in mind the position of our own nation on the other.”⁶⁷ Similarly, Qin Hui (秦晖) most recently has sought to use Western theory to redeem the Confucian tradition from Legalist pollution.⁶⁸ In fact, Xu Jilin's use of liberal theory leads him to conclude that public intellectuals in China are better off organizing the institutions of publicity, such as journals, newspapers and websites, than in organizing independent political parties.⁶⁹

We have seen some characteristics of contemporary Chinese thought work in these examples. First, the extensive interest in analysing and explaining Habermas, Hayek, Weber, Arandt and other

65. Maurice Meisner, *Li Ta-chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Joshua A. Fogel, *Ai Ssu-ch'i's Contribution to the Development of Chinese Marxism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Council on East Asian Studies, 1987); Nick Knight, *Li Da and Marxist Philosophy in China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

66. Liu Dong, “The Weberian view and Confucianism” (translated by Gloria Davies), *Far Eastern History* (Canberra), December 2003. For an example of interest in conservative liberalism, see Zhang Rulun's translation of Michael Oakeshott's essays, *Zhengzhi zhongde lixingzhuyi (Rationalism in Politics)* (Shanghai: Shanghai yiyen chubanshe, 2003). Axel Schneider has analysed conservative thought, including Confucian revivalism, in both Republican and contemporary Chinese thought. See Schneider, “Bridging the gap: attempts at constructing a ‘new’ historical-cultural identity in the PRC,” *East Asian History*, Vol. 22 (2001), pp. 129–144.

67. Liu Dong, “Jingt renweide ‘Yangjingbang xuefeng,’” *Ershiyi shiji*, No. 32 (1995), pp. 4–13, translated by Gloria Davies and Li Kaiyu, with a new prefatory section by Liu Dong, as “Revisiting the perils of ‘designer pidgin scholarship,’” in Davies, *Voicing Concerns*, pp. 87–108, quotation from p. 96. Liu Dong continues this theme in his collection of essays, *Lilun yu xinzhì (Theory and Wisdom)* (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2001).

68. Qin Hui, “Xi Ru hui rong, jiegou ‘fa-dao hubu’ – wenhua xiandaihua yu Zhongguo zhishiren” (“Deconstruction of ‘complementarity between law and dao’ through blending of Western learning and Confucianism: cultural modernization and Chinese intellectuals”) (title as translated in conference proceedings), paper delivered at “Public Intellectuals and Modern China,” ECNU, Shanghai, December 2002. Qin Hui explores these themes in *Si wuya, xing youzhi (Thought Without Bounds, Action Within Control)* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2002).

69. Xu, “Gonggong zhishifenzi ruhe keneng.”

theorists reflects a key intellectual assumption: social answers can be found from correct theory. This focus on thought (*sixiang*) is intended to contribute to practical, political results. It is a pluralized inheritance of the intellectual project of one stream of China's intellectuals since Li Dazhao and Li Da, and most recently generated in the life of socialist China under Mao. That most people in China today have given up on the CCP and its official ideology as a source of these correct ideas,⁷⁰ and that many have given up on the whole idea and gone for other ways to make sense of their lives, does not weaken, as these examples show, the intense dedication of some influential academic intellectuals in China today to get the *sixiang* right.

Secondly, the presumption in this Sinophone discourse that theory is general and not limited to its culture of origin (that is, naturalizing theory) can and does operate in a discourse of pluralism, open debate and theory testing that are familiar ideals in Western universities.⁷¹ All comers are taken and tested. The approach of Xu Jilin and his colleagues to Western social theory feels closer to Tang Chinese monks debating the school of the mind and levels of truth in Buddhism than Republican period scholars worrying how to make liberalism or Marxism more Chinese. However, this apparent cosmopolitanism is rooted in a nationalist intellectual project that contemporary Chinese intellectuals share with Republican scholars: how to construct a fully fledged modern national culture.⁷²

Finally, contemporary public academic thought work seeks to define a public role for China's dis-established intellectuals. Xu Jilin's review on what intellectuals can do and his suggestions of what they should do reflect the contours of this current search for correct theory. It is not a search for a unitary science that explains all. It is, however, a search for theory that will guide scholarly action and public policy in comprehensive – if admittedly more pluralistic – ways. Xu's introduction to *Another Kind of Enlightenment* accepts that China at century's end is post-modern and broken up by identity politics and multiple media channels into communities of discourse that have their own logic and distrust other communities. The role of the public intellectual, suggests Xu, is – to take up Bauman's typology – to translate, to interpret between these alienated groups, to be cultural diplomats in the globalized postmodern universe of China today. What public intellectuals need in order to do this work of inter-community interpretation is to discover the fundamental rules of discourse that constitute the sub-strata of shared rationality among

70. See Misra, *From Post-Maoism* and Gang Lin and Xiaobo Hu, *China After Jiang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

71. The post-colonial critique of Western theory, is not, however, general among Xu Jilin's circles (though it does exist in Sinophone discourse and is most associated with Wang Hui. See, for example, Wang Hui, *China's New Order*.

72. The intellectual history of this intellectual, as well as popular and state, nationalism is well analysed in Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*. See, as well, the essays in Wen-hsin Yeh (ed.), *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

communities. With this fundamental rationality – that is general and open-ended enough to accommodate radically different communities – public intellectuals gain a leading role in recreating a public that can acknowledge and accommodate these radically different communities while getting them to work together towards shared goals. This is the thought work of China’s public intellectuals.