Review Article

Modern China
Volume XX Number X
Month XXXX xx-xx

10.1177/0097700408320037
http://mc.sagepub.com
hosted at
http://online.sagepub.com

In Search of a Chinese Modernity

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

Philip C. C. Huang
People's University of China and UCLA

Wang Hui's four-volume work is of breathtaking scope and complexity. The first volume is about the Neo-Confucian theme of "heavenly principle" *tianli*, analyzed in terms of the problematique of the relationship between "principle" (*li*) and "things" (*wu*); the second turns to the question of "empire versus nation-state," which Wang Hui shows to be a dominant modernist binary in Western (and Japanese) conceptions of China, and argues that it is fundamentally flawed for understanding the nature of the Qing and Republican Chinese state; the third volume turns to major late Qing and early Republican thinkers and their reconfigurings, for and against, of the old "heavenly principle" tianli into *gongli*, or "public/general principle," which incorporated modern Western notions of scientific laws, while still maintaining the old ethical-political concerns of the "principle" li of tianli; the fourth volume, finally, turns to the rise from the above background of the "community of the discourse of science" as the central theme of Chinese thought in the twentieth century. The four volumes total a whopping 1,608 pages of dense text. The introduction itself takes up 100 pages (Wang Hui, 2008a).

Many reviews have been written about the work since its publication in 2004, and I will not attempt a comprehensive discussion here. Instead, what I will do, on this occasion of its second printing, is to try to make the work's main contributions more accessible to the non-specialist, at the risk of gross oversimplification of its subtle nuances and massive detail. One useful way to start, it seems to me, is to describe briefly the distinctive method and persistent foil that run throughout the work, before attempting to summarize some of its substantive highlights.

To begin with, Wang Hui juxtaposes two discourses: one the Western modernist and the other China's. He uses the modernist as a foil with which to uncover historicized meanings of Chinese concepts, aiming to set them

into their own context. He employs this method also in the reverse direction, using the internalized Chinese concepts as foils to historicize major Western categories like "empire," "nation-state," "market economy," "science," and "scientism." In this way, each one is used to clarify and illuminate the other. It is a method that requires close textual reading and analysis, but always with the help of insights derived from comparison.

The method, it must be made clear, is no mere discursive analysis qua discursive analysis, nor the study of the history of ideas qua ideas. Rather, Wang Hui's inquiry is always predicated on the insistence on a keen grasp of the larger historical background, based on the firm conviction that that is what allows for setting ideas and discourses into their internal context and what makes possible the search for historicized meaning. It is the historian with the sense of the big and multifaceted picture, not the simple post-modernist studying discourse qua discourse, that lies at the center of his method.

The other constant in Wang Hui's work is his foil throughout, which is what he understands to be the master narrative of Western modernism, the target that all his work ultimately addresses. At the core of that foil is the self-representation of the history of the modern West as centering on the development of free-market capitalism, liberty and democracy, the modern nation-state, and universalist science. "Tradition," and the non-capitalist-democratic "other," make up the obverse parts of that narrative about the Western modern. Wang Hui, of course, is targeting that foil, because he sees it both as the hegemonic discourse of our globalized world and as the currently dominant ideology of modernizationism in China.

We might best begin our summary of the work, as Wang Hui himself does in his introduction, with a consideration of U.S. China scholarship, centering on the empire versus nation-state construct. Though the relevance of the binary may not be immediately evident to some readers, there can be no question about its influence in the American China field, shown for example in the unquestioned use of the standard categories of "imperial China" versus "modern China" or "twentieth-century China." As Wang Hui quickly makes clear, the empire vs. nation-state binary is accompanied by a host of expectations and assumptions based on the West's narrative of its own modernity, which Wang Hui traces at some length to nineteenth-century thinkers like Hegel and Adam Smith. But, as Wang Hui shows, Qing China and Republican China both turn out to be quite different from those expectations. Contrary to the emphasis on national-racial and linguistic consistency expected of the modern nation-state, the Republic of China quickly gave up its anti-Manchu nationalist revolutionary ideology for an ideology of multi-ethnicity, of "five races in one people" (*wuzu heyi*).

And, instead of the Qing empire breaking up into different ethnic-national units, the Republic, and then the People's Republic, succeeded to the same political boundaries of the Qing. The Qing "empire" had in fact already arrived at clearly defined political boundaries in the manner of a nation-state. And it had governed with that multi-ethnic ideology that would be retained in the Republic. (Indeed, according to Wang Hui, it could not have been otherwise, for the Manchus took over rule as an "alien" "race" themselves; only with a multi-ethnic ideology could they hope to govern "China.") And so one finds the anomaly, from the point of view of the modernist narrative, in which the Qing "empire" and Republican Chinese "nation-state" show basic similarities and continuities. The Chinese "empire," in other words, was not quite like an empire, and the Chinese "nation-state," not quite like a nation-state. Therein lies the heart of Wang Hui's reinterpretation of the history of the Chinese polity. Therein lies also part of the conceptual space for his search for an alternative vision for China's political present and future.

Wang Hui extends this empire versus nation-state analysis also to a variant of the modernist narrative in the Kyoto School of Japanese scholarship, the more relevant for U.S.-based China scholars because of John Fairbank and Edwin Reischauer's textbook (1958), by which so many of us were first introduced to Chinese history. That book had borrowed wholesale, through Reischauer and his acquaintance with Japanese Sinology rather than through Fairbank, the Naitō hypothesis in its account of Tang and Song China. The Kyoto School had emerged in Japan in opposition to the standard modernist narrative of the Chinese empire as pre-capitalist and despotic, agricultural and anti-democratic, culturalist (rather than nationalist) and pre-nation state. It argued instead that modern tendencies were evident already in China by the Tang-Song transition, when a market economy flourished, when the contours of centralized nation-state rule and modern bureaucracy emerged in the *junxian* (as opposed to parcellized *fengjian*) system, and when proto-capitalism, proto-rationalism, and even a proto-nationalism arose. Song China in that analysis was already early-modern, not the backward empire depicted by the Tokyo School.

This line of thought, Wang Hui argues convincingly, is in fact every bit as modernist as its obverse, for it assumes the universality of the Western modernist narrative no less than its enemy. The only difference is that instead of depicting China as being the backward "other," it seeks to validate China for being just like the West. It projects onto China, in short, characteristics that are more of the West's own construction than those internal to China.

How might such a train of thought reorganize our thinking about "middle imperial" China? Song Confucian thought, Wang Hui shows, centered on the "heavenly principle" (tianli), which separated out "things" (wu) from ethics (*li*), instead of combining them as in the older Confucian notion of "the way" (*dao*). An ethical order (li) was supposed to inhere in things, as well as in daily ritual practices, to be grasped through study. (It was to be given a subjectivist turn by Ming Confucian thought, whereby that heavenly principle would inhere in one's own self, to be grasped through inward reflection). That same heavenly principle was seen by the Kyoto School (as well as numerous other analysts) as evidencing a turn to the secular and the rational, almost a kind of proto-science view of the world. But, as Wang Hui shows, in the Song historical context, the heavenly principle was in fact invoked to criticize the very characteristics that the Naitō School pointed to as proto-modern. In the call for a return to the three ancient dynasties (*sandai*) lay the criticism of contemporary political tendencies, couched as concerns for re-linking the political with the ethical; in the call for a return to the well-field system of the three dynasties was the criticism of the collapse of the equal-field system and the tax system that followed it; and, in the call for the return to the parcellized fengjian system of the three dynasties lay the criticism of the excessive centralization of the junxian system as well as its bureaucracy and associated civil service examination system. For Song thinkers, the "heavenly principle" came with a notion of historical circumstances and forces, or *shishi,* changing but non-linear, which Wang Hui invokes both to clarify the meaning of "heavenly principle" and to challenge the Kyoto School's narrative. Set into its own context, the meaning of the "heavenly principle" turns out to be indeed very different from the views of the Kyoto School.

So here again, we see how the modernist narrative led us to misconstrue the historical intentions of Neo-Confucianism. Wang Hui insists on placing Song ideas into their "internal" context instead, and it is the contrast with the modernist understanding, as well as the appreciation of historical context, that help us recapture the intent of tianli for Song thinkers. For Wang Hui, that historicized internal understanding, in turn, would provide us with a different understanding of late Qing thought and history, a different way of viewing modern Western science (with its insistence on separating out science from ethics and politics), and, in the end, a different way of viewing contemporary China and the alternative possibilities before it.

Wang Hui's next big task is changes in thought in the late Qing and the Republic. The "heavenly principle" (tianli), he shows, was first reconfigured by late Qing thinkers, principally Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, into the

"public" or "general principle" (gongli) in which the li is now conceptualized to include something akin to scientific laws and progress, but still retains features of the old tianli, still encompassing not just nature, but politics and society as well. It was as part of that conception of "general principle" that Yan Fu (and Liang Qichao) formulated the idea of *qun*, or community (or group, society, and even "nation"). Benjamin Schwartz of our American China field had shown how Yan Fu reinterpreted classical liberalism: instead of its original meaning of individual liberty, juxtaposed against the state, Yan understood liberty to mean the release of individual energies for the purpose of state power. (And Schwartz emphasized how in that process Yan arrived at his penetrating and original perception of the "Faustian" character of the modern West.) That, we might say, was for Yan Fu the li inhering in qun. It was indeed fundamentally different from the original classical-liberal conception of John Stuart Mill or John Locke. But, for Wang Hui, the issue here is not "correct" understanding, but rather the different historical circumstances and concerns each reveals: the one about the assertion of the bourgeoisie's power against the state in a binary of society vs. the state, and the other about a state and society seeking to strengthen themselves in tandem. That understanding, once more, opens up not only a re-interpretation of the meaning of Yan Fu's and Liang Qichao's thought, but also alternative possibilities for conceptualizing the relationship between state and society in China's present.

Zhang Taiyan is perhaps the oddest duck of the many thinkers considered within the frame of this work. He was a critic of the new gongli of Yan Fu and Liang Qichao. A revolutionary with strong anarchistic tendencies, Zhang arrived at a conception of the individual that was derived from Daoist and Buddhist roots**,** not Western classical liberalism. The individual for Zhang was not the ultimate source of value or identity, as for the classical liberal. He would have nothing of the property-owning, rights-endowed, and self-interested individual. For him, individuality was conceptualized finally as a self-less state, and ultimately blended together with an undifferentiated equality of all persons and things, including nature itself. From such a conception, Zhang also came to criticize Yan Fu's and Liang Qichao's state and society or qun, as well as their new gongli. The elaborately complex analysis of Zhang, we might surmise, is for Wang Hui meant to be something of an additional resource for alternative visions of modernity.

Wang Hui moves next to the rise in China of a "community of the discourse of science," really the culmination of his analysis of the tianli of Song Confucianism and the transitional gongli of late Qing thought. He begins with an analysis to show how very completely the knowledge

system changed in China with the adoption of modern universities and branches of learning, testimony to the full influence of the discourse of modern Western science. This was not a matter of a few thinkers, but of lasting reorganization of knowledge and knowledge-production in China. The modern disciplines, universities, and university professors as producers of knowledge, as Wang Hui demonstrates, were the distinctive products of this fundamental shift. Here the reader comes to see all the more clearly the sense and importance of the earlier analyses.

At this point Wang Hui's study takes a perhaps unexpected turn, in its attention to the construct "scientism," employed among others by our American China field's own D. W. Y. Kwok in his influential early work on modern Chinese thought (1965). Wang Hui traces that concept and usage powerfully to the economist-political theorist Frederick von Hayek, who begins, sensibly enough, with the notion that individuals in a market economy can only have imperfect information and that, therefore, it is wrong to project onto them perfect reason, or use the assumptions and methods of the natural sciences to study economics. But then von Hayek goes on to construct the fiction that the market economy of the liberal-democratic West is something in which imperfect individual choices, free from any state interference, make up through the price mechanism the most nearly perfect natural economic order. In the end, he reveals that his intent is above all to criticize the socialist planned economies. As Wang Hui points out, the actual history of the development of market economy and capitalism in the West was in fact inseparable from massive state sponsorship and interference in the forms first of mercantilism and then of imperialism. He calls on Fernand Braudel, who pointed out how the capitalist state was not about protecting free markets, but rather about protecting monopolies. He calls also on Karl Polanyi, who conceptualized capitalism as being more "anti-market" than pro-market. For Wang Hui, that (monopoly) capitalist-imperialist trajectory today takes the form of the globalized economy, propagated by the developed nation-states in conjunction with the multi-national corporations. Von Hayek's contrived free market economy was in this analysis intended to serve a political agenda, to denigrate socialist planned economies and advocate free-market capitalism. The equation of scientism/positivism with non-Western socialist systems serves to divert attention from a fundamental characteristic of the modern West itself, thereby to maintain the full legitimacy of its own claim to real science, itself a key to the discursive hegemony of the West. Needless to say, herein is also Wang Hui's criticism of classical and neo-classical economics as a whole.

Once again, Wang Hui's readings of tianli and gongli, and even of the modern Chinese science-discourse community, are not only reinterpretations of that central and internalized theme of Chinese thought, but also a means to challenge the universalist and positivist claims for science made by the modern West. They are intended to open up questions of the ethical, and political-social, dimensions of modern science. The separation of science from ethics and politics, Wang Hui suggests, is an understanding that could be liberating, as in freeing nature from the domination of God and the church, but it could also be oppressive, as it became under nineteenth-century positivism. (The converse insistence on conceptualizing science as inseparable from ethics and politics, one might here suggest along Wang Hui's line of thinking, could be oppressive, as in the Maoist period's totalistic control, or it could be liberating, in overcoming epistemological positivism, as Wang Hui would wish for in China's present and future.)

All of the above, it should be pointed out, are firmly anchored on Wang Hui's close readings of texts, which lie at the base of his method and form the building blocks of his study. It is that approach that gives his work its precision and solidity. The method of going back and forth between the Western and Chinese thinkers should be evident from the short summary above. But in the end it is perhaps the kind of historian Wang Hui is, even more than his method, that truly distinguishes him from other critics of modernist discourse. What he works with is a view of history, or sense of reality (which he himself would term "historical sense," *lishigan*), that is at once grand and specific, past and present, Chinese and Western. It encompasses, one might almost say, the grand perspectives of both a Marx and a Weber, of social-economic systems as well as ideas and thought, of structures as well as process, and of large historical forces as well as individual agency and historical contingency. That large view of history and sense of reality are what finally lend Wang Hui's comparative discursive analyses depth and power.

Wang Hui is perfectly upfront about his overarching purpose. He is profoundly critical of modernism as constructed in the standard master narrative of the West, now dominant in China, which he considers fundamentally faulty in its views of China and, for that matter, also of the West itself. He would search for alternative understandings. That search, occurring in back and forth comparisons between a Western modernist narrative and his reconstructed Chinese narrative, once again, is not just a matter of one discursive system against the other, for Wang Hui is not arguing for the superiority of Chinese discourse or thought, much less a simple return to China's past. He calls for facing squarely the undeniable presence and influence of the modern West and its globalized capitalist order, but without adopting

simply its proffered path to "modernity." Rather, Wang Hui would draw on his reinterpretations of China's past in light of China's present needs. It is thus about the search for a distinctive Chinese modernity or, in his terms, an "anti-modern modernity." For him, the first step in that search is to free China's own history from being an "object" in the master narrative imposed by the modern West. That is why he titles his most recent summary of and reflection on his own work "The Liberation of the Object and the Interrogation of Modernity" (2008b).

We might conclude this brief review with a short inventory of the contributions of this work. It provides, first of all, a thorough-going rethinking of some dominant assumptions employed in American (and Japanese) China scholarship, set into a fundamental rethinking of Western modernism as a whole. Considering his foil and the wide-ranging topics and bodies of literature studied, it might well stand as the most comprehensive critical reflection on American China scholarship yet attempted by anyone, dwarfing in scope and vision all that our own American China field has produced, going back to the early days of the challenge of the modernization paradigm by the revolution paradigm, the subsequent rise of social history, and the later cultural and linguistic turn. It is the larger questioning of the master narrative of modern Western civilization as a whole, not just U.S. (and Japanese) China research, that gives his reflections power and depth.

But that in itself is far from Wang Hui's total project. His is also an intellectual history (or history of Chinese thought, *sixiangshi)* in boldly reformulated terms and approach. It is done by focused analysis around a central problematique of the relationship between the material-social world and ethics, and the back and forth comparison of Chinese and Western thought. His is of course mainly a study of thought, but that study is firmly anchored on a very clear-sighted grasp of historical circumstances and change (again shishi) outside of ideas. His is thus very different from conventional studies of intellectual history. In the end, his study is so different as to defy simple categorization as intellectual history. In this respect, the title of his work ("The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought") is actually somewhat misleading, for it directs the reader to expect a more conventional (perhaps even a modernist) intellectual history, when it is even more about the historicizing of ideas, a dialogue between China and the West, the past and the present, and thought and historical circumstance.

It is also a particular application of post-modernist theories and sensibilities, perhaps nowhere more evident than in the sustained dialogue with the modernist foil running throughout his work. Yet it must be distinguished from much of that body of scholarship, for it is inseparable from his grasp of a larger history outside of discourses. He must not be understood as simply "post-modernist"

because of his criticisms of the modernist master-narrative and his uses of some of the standard post-modernist language. Far from disregarding history outside of discourse, he insists upon it; and far from being critical for the sake of being critical, he is out to build a new vision for a new China.

Finally, the work is breathtaking for its recounting of the journey from tianli to gongli to the discourse of science, for its focus on a central problem of obvious importance, and stunning continuity as well as change. It serves as a comparative foil to the modernist severing of science from ethics and politics. And it is truly provocative for its argument that the construct of scientism, by attributing bad science to non-Western socialist countries, serves to legitimize the West's own claims to real science. Wang Hui is especially critical of neo-classical economics and its associated ideology, which he in the Chinese context calls "neo-liberalism" (also the term used by leftists internationally), roughly the same as what is more commonly labeled in the U.S. "neo-conservatism." It is, in the end, of course tantamount to a thoroughgoing critical reflection upon our entire modernist system of knowledge.

For all of the reasons above, it is perhaps not surprising that the work has been widely hailed as *the* outstanding work in Chinese scholarship of the last twenty years. Its achievement is the more striking in light of that world's near complete subordination to Western modernist assumptions, its rigid compartmentalization of the disciplines, and its pervasive hastiness, superficiality, and monetarism. This short review can indicate only some of the possible new understandings of China's past and present that this work points to, but it should be clear that the overall burden of the work is to lead to a very different view of history from what most of us in China as well as in the U.S. have been accustomed to. A few more works like this and China can properly claim its place in the world as a major center of grand historical scholarship and original theoretical work.

References

KWOK, D. W. Y. (1965) Scientism in Chinese Thought. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press.

REISCHAUER, EDWIN O. and JOHN KING FAIRBANK (1958) East Asia: The Great Tradition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, multiple reprintings thereafter.

WANG HUI (2008a) Xiandai Zhongguo sixiang de xingqi (The rise of modern Chinese thought), 4 volumes. Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004; 2nd printing, 2008.

_____ (2008b) "Liberation of the Object and the Interrogation of Modernity," in The Nature of the Chinese State: Dialogues among Western and Chinese Scholars, I, Modern China 34, 1 (Jan.): 114-140.

Philip C. C. Huang has been teaching a year-long graduate seminar in China every other year. He is at work on the third volume of his study of Chinese civil justice.