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Liu Zehua and Studies of China’s Monarchism

Guest Editor’s Introduction

Abstract: This introduction surveys the biography and major works of Liu Zehua, a leading scholar of China’s intellectual history, political thought, and political culture. It explores the impact of Liu Zehua’s personal experience, in particular the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, on his conceptualization of Chinese political culture as subjugated to the overarching principle of monarchism. Liu Zehua’s critical engagement with China’s past distinguishes him from proponents of revival of traditional values and makes him one of the powerful opponents of cultural conservatives in China.

Liu Zehua is a towering figure in China’s intellectual circles. A widely acclaimed leader of what is dubbed “Nankai current,” “Liu Zehua current,” or, more recently, “Ideology of Monarchism current,” he has been an active participant in ideological battles waged in the field of China’s intellectual history since the early 1970s. His

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opponents dub him as “antitraditionalist,” “cultural nihilist,” and “Marxist” (which is no longer a laudatory term for many Chinese scholars). But even his fiercest critics cannot deny his tremendous impact on the field of Chinese history in general and on studies of Chinese political thought and political culture in particular.¹

Early Years

Liu Zehua considers his early career as a chain of lucky coincidences. His mother was the elder daughter of a poor peasant from Hebei, and as she had to take care of her younger siblings, she missed the upper limit of the marriage age, which was twenty at that time. By then, as she became seriously ill, her father began urgently looking for a ghost bridegroom: an unmarried maiden was not allowed to be buried in the family’s graveyard, and had to be posthumously married off to a ghost of a lonely man with whom she would then be buried together. At that moment, a matchmaker appeared on behalf of an elderly widower from a neighboring village: thirty years her elder, he was looking for a new bride to replace his recently deceased spouse. The marriage proved highly successful: not only did the bride recover from her nearly lethal illness, but she also gave her husband five sons and a daughter (in addition to four children from the previous wife). Liu Zehua, born in 1935, was the youngest son, the ninth in his family.

Although Liu Zehua’s father was labeled by the Communists “rich peasant,” his richness was relative and did not suffice to provide adequate education for his progeny. Zehua’s older brothers attended primary school for one or two years only, which was normal for the family, for most of its members had been illiterate for generations. Yet here destiny intervened: when a three-year-old Zehua was playing with his five-year-old brother, a physiognomist passed by them and predicted a bright future for both. Since the physiognomist left without asking for any payment, Zehua’s father believed the prediction and urged his wife to take care of the children’s education after his anticipated death. Thus, both children attended school and made a successful career: one as a renowned professor, the other as a high-ranking Party cadre.

Growing up in a village located near the strategically important Shijiazhuang-Dezhou railway was a harsh experience. Liu Zehua grew up under Japanese occupation: as early as primary school, he had to undergo quasi-military training, study Japanese language, and salute the portrait of the Japanese emperor. After 1945, the village became embroiled in the civil war between the Guomindang (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) forces: the GMD authorities placed the severed heads of suspected Communist supporters at the entrances to the village, while Communist guerrillas launched night attacks, kidnapping and executing their enemies. In 1947, the school suspended classes in the wake of the Communist takeover; the young Liu Zehua had to give up his educational dreams and return to agricultural work at the family's plot of land. Yet by the end of 1948, Zehua enrolled in a newly opened school, and in the next year, successfully passed exams to enter a secondary school in Shijiazhuang: a rare achievement for a peasant's son in those years! The physiognomist's prediction continued to become a reality: upon graduation in 1952, Liu Zehua was enrolled in the newly opened Russian language training courses in Tianjin, which granted him qualification as a certified teacher even without entering high school. A few years later, after a brief career as a "teacher of [Marxist] theory" in Shijiazhuang, Liu Zehua had finally fulfilled his dream, having been enrolled in the Department of History at the prestigious Nankai University, Tianjin. Already in 1958 he was selected, unexpectedly for a young student, as a teacher assistant, and this position became permanent in 1961, shortly before his official graduation. His career as a professional historian had begun.

Liu Zehua joined the Communist Party in the early 1950s, and through the 1960s, he remained, in his own words, a staunch "believer" in the Party, and of course, in Chairman Mao. He might have well joined the ranks of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution had he not been lucky enough to be sidelined because of his problematic "rich peasant" background and because of complaints against him launched by more zealous activists. During the tumultuous years of 1966 to 1972, he was intermittently put on probation lists, struggled against, pardoned, and allowed to join the "revolutionary masses," sent to reeducation by labor, and

again restored in his teaching assistant position in a crippled and badly battered Nankai University. While his relatively insignificant position allowed him to avoid the worse fate of becoming either a major victim or a victimizer, the experiences of repeated upheavals were nonetheless bitter enough. It was then that Liu Zehua began contemplating the reasons for the ongoing madness and cruelty. Refusing to blame the “excesses” only on Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and on Mao’s henchmen, Liu Zehua began seeking deeper answers. This search eventually led him to investigate the impact of political power on Chinese society and culture, and the ideological roots of the ruler’s absolute authority. Like many intellectuals of his generation, Liu Zehua could consider the Cultural Revolution as the formative age in his intellectual development.

Ideological Controversies: Scholarship and Politics

In 1972, following the fall of Lin Biao (1907–1971), who was designated a “leftist deviationist,” China witnessed a temporary ideological relaxation that allowed the renewal of academic publications.² It was then that Liu Zehua first entered inadvertently into a major ideological controversy. He had written an article on the First Emperor of Qin (r. 246–221–210 B.C.E.), who was much hailed by Maoist propaganda. Liu Zehua duly praised Emperor’s achievements, but also allowed a few critical remarks about the oppressive nature of the Qin government. The remarks were couched in the acceptable language of class struggle, and the article was approved by the Party branch in the university and accepted for publication due in the summer of 1973. Yet just when the issue of the *Nankai Academic Journal* had been printed, a new directive came: Lin Biao was henceforth identified not as a “leftist” but as an “extreme rightist” deviationist, and the First Emperor, with whom Mao openly identified himself, was no longer to be criticized. The frightened party secretary of the university ordered Liu Zehua to write a self-criticism and sent him back to the countryside temporarily to avoid further troubles, while all of the 8,000 exemplars of the journal were burned immediately. The article was eventually published in 1977, a year after Mao’s death, while Liu Zehua’s

interest in the First Emperor brought about further studies of this emperor's role in China's history, and especially in the elevation of China's monarchs to the position of absolute supremacy (see below).

In 1974, Liu Zehua became involved in a second, more overt controversy.³ In the summer, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing (1914–1991), and her supporters (the would-be “Gang of Four”) launched a full-scale anti-Confucian campaign. According to their interpretation of history, the struggle between “Confucians” and “Legalists” went back to the Spring and Autumn period (Chunqiu, 770–453 B.C.E.) and continued uninterruptedly thenceforth well into the age of the People's Republic, when it emerged into the “struggle between the two lines” in the Communist Party. To validate this idea, and to validate the position of the “Legalists” as eternally “progressive” fighters against “reactionary” Confucians, Jiang Qing called a large scholarly conference in Beijing in July, attended not just by scholars but also by most of the Party leaders, as well as representatives of “workers and peasants.” Liu Zehua was also invited and presented his views, which differed sharply from the new Party line. He claimed that, first, both Legalists and Confucians represented different groups of exploiters, so that their struggle should be analyzed as internal contradiction within the ruling classes rather than that between progressives and reactionaries; and, second, that there was no evidence for any eternal struggle between the two, for actually, already by the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the ideological controversy subsided considerably and disappeared from later periods. Liu Zehua's presentation caused a sharp clash between him and one of Jiang Qing's major henchmen, Chi Qun (1932–1983) from Qinghua University. Luckily, Liu Zehua was again spared persecution, but had to silence himself until the end of Mao's era.

Liu Zehua's clash with the “Gang of Four” gained him much credit in the aftermath of their downfall in October 1976; in the next two years, Liu emerged as an influential historian, one of the most prominent members of the younger generation of Chinese scholars. Those two years (1977–1978) were marked by the tense struggle between the so-called whateverist faction of conserva-

tives who did not want to depart from fundamental aspects of Mao Zedong's legacy (including the legacy of the Cultural Revolution), and their reformist opponents centered around the reascending leader, Deng Xiaoping, and his supporters. Many intellectuals joined the struggle on the side of the reformists, attacking manifold aspects of the Cultural Revolution and the associated ideological premises and political practices.⁴ Liu Zehua played an eminent role in this ideological counterattack against Maoist positions. His first polemical article, published in 1978 in *Historical Studies* (Lishi yanjiu) not only rejected the "revolution in historiography" launched by the radicals back in 1966, and not only labeled the rule of the Gang of Four as "fascist dictatorship," but stepped further into the direction of ideological liberalization. Liu Zehua called upon suspension of "forbidden zones" in historical research, objective reassessment of Confucianism (which was still stigmatized as "reactionary thought"), and a general abandonment of the "deification" and "demonization" of historical personalities. His next major article called downgrading of the overall importance of the class struggle as the singular explanation of historical processes, refocusing instead on the concept of "productive forces." In the third article, he put forward a balanced reassessment of the First Emperor, presenting him as a complex historical personality with manifold merits but also many faults and failures. Each of his articles contributed in its own way to the ongoing ideological thaw that matured in the 1980s, and gained Liu Zehua a position at the forefront of ideological battles of the time. In 1983, during the campaign "against spiritual pollution," he was targeted again as "lacking fundamental understanding of Marxism," but was spared from serious persecution.

In the 1980s, Liu Zehua became the chair of the History Department at Nankai University, which, under his leadership, became the best department of history among mainland universities. The peculiar position of Tianjin—close enough to Beijing to be involved in major political controversies at the capital, but also distant enough to avoid excessive censorship and political oppression—allowed the new chair to launch a few bold experiments, including China's first ever course on the history of human rights (a concept that was just

starting to emerge in the 1980s from the shadow of illegitimacy), and even a course on the history of the Cultural Revolution. Yet the thaw of the 1980s eventually came to an end with the mass student protest of 1989 and its subsequent brutal suppression. Liu Zehua, like a few other leading professors at Nankai University, joined the students' protests in April and May of 1989, suspending classes and actively participating in some of the demonstrations. He did it somewhat reluctantly, realizing that the student movement went too far and would inevitably provoke harsh backlash, but also considering support of the students as his moral responsibility. The presence of a few leading and hugely popular professors among the student protesters in Tianjin proved an important factor in moderating the protests and preventing violent clashes and deaths in the city.

In the aftermath of the 1989 events, Liu Zehua was fired from his position as the Department's chair, but was otherwise spared. He suspended his Party activities, but continued ever more active involvement in scholarly work, deepening his analysis of the overarching power of Chinese monarchs and their impact on China's sociopolitical and intellectual trajectory. The spirit of political criticism that continued to permeate his articles in the 1990s distinguished them markedly from the common trend of increasing self-censorship and preference of "pure scholarship" over implicit or overt political engagement by scholars in humanistic disciplines. Since the late 1990s, he has been moving between the United States (where his two daughters and their families currently live) and Nankai. Having officially retired, he continues his active intellectual life—publishing, advising students, and participating in scholarly conferences. His impact is very perceptible at Nankai University and elsewhere, where his manifold students and colleagues continue to develop and discuss some of his ideas, rendering the "Ideology of Monarchism" one of the vibrant themes in current Chinese historical studies.⁵

Ideology and the Practice of Monarchism

There is no doubt that Liu Zehua's scholarly interests were shaped to a considerable extent by his personal experiences. Liu Zehua's

quest to understand patterns of political behavior under Mao's dictatorship, particularly during the Cultural Revolution; his involvement with liberalizing tendencies of the 1970s and 1980s; his sympathy with the students' movement of 1989; his critical views of authoritarian trends in China's politics thereafter—all these may explain his preoccupation with the question of political power and its role in China's socioeconomic and intellectual history. As such, there is no doubt that like many eminent historians in China, Liu Zehua “uses the past to criticize the present.” And yet, he remains foremost a historian deeply committed to facts and to analysis of the complexity of traditional Chinese sociopolitical and intellectual systems; he is definitely not a political philosopher, and none of his publications is aimed at proposing recipes for alleviating China's current problems. While his studies do call for drawing certain historical lessons, these lessons cannot be reduced to simplistic “do” or “do not” advice for the present; Liu Zehua neither glosses over the rupture with the past that occurred in the twentieth century nor necessarily laments it. He is forever careful to avoid either adoration or demonization of China's millennia-old experience with a monarchic form of rule; rather, by raising the readers' awareness of the pitfalls of the traditional monarchic political system, his studies caution against perpetuating patterns of the monarchic past in the postmonarchic present.

As is appropriate for a Marxist scholar, Liu Zehua started his exploration of political power in China in the late 1970s by analyzing its socioeconomic impact. In a nutshell, his findings are presented in the opening passage in “Monarchism: A Historical Orientation of Chinese Intellectual Culture,” the first article in this issue: “I believe that the major peculiarity of traditional Chinese society was that the monarch's power controlled society.” This phrase summarizes more than a decade of explorations by Liu Zehua, which are presented in a book titled *Dictatorial Power and China's Society*, coauthored with Wang Maohe and Wang Lanzhong.⁶ The starting point of these explorations was a study of the formation of large landownership in preimperial China: Liu Zehua found out that almost no known land transaction was based on the purchase of land; rather, land was grabbed, granted, or exchanged—but almost

never purchased, at least not until the very end of the Warring States period (Zhanguo, 453–221 B.C.E.).⁷ It turns out that the earliest class of large landowners in China was created by political power; this ability of the ruling stratum to intervene in economic and social relations, especially but not exclusively through the reallocation of resources, remained one of China's major peculiarities for millennia to come. While Liu Zehua and his collaborators are aware of the de facto limits to the state's economic interventionism under many dynasties, they point out that there were no institutional limitations to the state's power (e.g., there was no concept of inalienable private property of land), which allowed the ruling stratum to repeatedly reallocate land and other resources. Similarly, social hierarchy in China was primarily (and at times, exclusively) determined by the state, that is, once again by the ruling stratum. These socioeconomic foundations of China's monarchic system stand at the background of this system's exceptional power in the realms of ideology and culture as well.

Study of the intellectual foundations of China's monarchic system became the main avenue of Liu Zehua's research since the early 1980s. Already in the first of his many monographs on the topic, *History of Pre-Qin Political Thought* (Xian Qin zhengzhi sixiang shi) (1984), Liu Zehua summarizes:

Ostensibly, the struggle among “the Hundred Schools [of thought]” was imbued with a certain democratic atmosphere. Yet when we analyze the content of the ideas of the “Hundred Schools,” we discover that speaking of politics, the absolute majority of thinkers advocated the authoritarian mode of rule, and speaking of ideology, they all demanded to dismiss their rivals and elevate themselves, hoping that the authoritarian system would be based on their own theory. Therefore, the practical outcome of the “Content of the Hundred Schools” . . . was improving and strengthening the authoritarian system. Only when we grasp this point can we understand the political bottom line of the Hundred Schools.⁸

Two points made here will remain characteristic of Liu Zehua's continuous exploration of the history of Chinese political thought. The first is the search for the “bottom line,” identified here as the support of the “authoritarian system” (*junzhu zhuanzhi*), which in

later publications Liu Zehua increasingly replaces with his favorite term “monarchism” (*wangquanzhuyi*, “the ideology of monarchic rule”). Liu Zehua notices that despite their differences, the absolute majority of preimperial thinkers considered the ruler-centered polity as both normative and desirable, and none ever posed an alternative. This understanding is pivotal for Liu’s effort to reassess ideological trends in the Warring States (and later periods): it stands at the background of each of his analyses of manifold political models and views of the ruler–minister relations and of the role of the commoners versus the ruler in preimperial texts.

The second major characteristic of Liu Zehua’s approach as revealed in the above passage is his emphasis on similarities rather than differences between the competing “Schools of Thought.” Liu Zehua does not abandon the “school” definition altogether: he continues to apply it for heuristic purposes in most of his textbooks, introductory studies, and in a few of his articles (including the second article in this issue, “The Contention of ‘A Hundred Schools of Thought’ and Development of the Theory of Monarchism During the Warring States Period”).⁹ However, he resolutely opposes reification of the “schools” and turning them into a major analytical unit as is done in the overwhelming majority of publications in China and elsewhere. Hence, in some of his most notable monographs, especially *Reflections on Traditional Chinese Thought* (*Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang fansi*) (1987) and *Modes of Traditional Chinese Political Thought* (*Zhongguo chuantong zhengzhi siwei*) (1991), Liu Zehua dispenses with “schools” altogether, analyzing ideas across the broad spectrum of received and unearthed texts.¹⁰ This approach allows him to highlight focal points of the Warring States period discourse and to explore commonalities and differences among thinkers concerning a broad variety of issues, such as views of Heaven, the Way, the Sage, concepts of the ruler, the minister, the people, approaches toward ritual, law, human nature, history, the state, the nature of social hierarchy, and so on. The ability to escape the common pitfall of subordinating one’s analysis to the “school” labels is surely one of the major strengths of Liu Zehua’s studies.

Why did preimperial thinkers, who enjoyed remarkable intellec-

tual freedom, overwhelmingly opt to support the monarchic system in which they could not occupy the leading position? Why did the assertive and perspicacious imperial literati acquiesce to the position of servitors in the ruler-centered world? These questions stand at the center of many of Liu Zehua's publications, the most notable of which are two volumes, *Shi and Society* (Shi ren yu shehui) (the pre-Qin volume [*Xian Qin juan*] and the Qin-Han-Wei-Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties [221 B.C.E.–589 C.E.] volume [*Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao juan*], both published by Tianjin renmin chubanshe in 1988). In both volumes, Liu Zehua explores the position of the intellectually active *shi* stratum in preimperial and early imperial China. Like other scholars who deal with the *shi* history, Liu Zehua lauds this stratum for its undeniable contribution to the formation of Chinese intellectual culture and for the formation of Chinese imperial polity, and he repeatedly hails the intellectual courage of individual *shi*. However, he also points to the limits of their autonomy—their economic and ideological dependence on the rulers' courts—and their resultant overwhelming commitment to the ruler-centered polity. In a later work, Liu Zehua discusses in greater detail the endless frustration of the imperial *shi*, concluding that their simultaneous commitment to the ruler-centered polity and to the Way (Dao), which should have placed them above the rulers, brought these literati into a kind of “psychosis” (*jingshen bing*).¹¹ This harsh verdict evidently hints at the twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals as well, although the parallel is never explicitly articulated, for understandable reasons.

Since the 1990s, Liu Zehua has shifted from socioeconomic and intellectual history per se toward the realm of political culture. It is by that time that his approach toward China's historical predicament crystallized in a series of articles, some of which are translated in this issue (in addition to two articles mentioned above, these are the third article, “The Monarch and the Sage: Between Bifurcation and Unification of the Two,” and the fourth, “The Unity of Heaven and Men, and China's Monarchism”).¹² In these publications, Liu Zehua goes beyond specific models and ideas of preimperial thinkers that influenced the building of the empire, and explores their modes of thought, which exercised lasting influence

on values, ideals, and behavioral patterns of major political actors throughout the imperial millennia. In particular, Liu Zehua focuses on the interrelations between four pivotal terms of the political discourse: Heaven (*Tian*), the Way (Dao), the Sage (*shengren*), and the Monarch (*wang*). Heaven was considered both a supreme deity expected to regulate the political realm, and a designation of the ultimate cosmic reality, namely, the impartial laws of the universe. The Way was an even higher abstraction: it was a referent to the supreme principles that were supposed to influence the functioning of the cosmos, society, and the individual. The Sage was the one who was able to grasp these principles, implement them in his life, and thereby attain super-human dimensions, approaching in his power both Heaven and the Way. Finally, the Monarch was the supreme political leader, the one without whom society would instantly disintegrate.

Each of the above four terms had its separate semantic field, but there was also a certain overlap among them. The overlap was in the figure of the Sage Monarch (*sheng wang*), which Liu Zehua considers a singularly potent ideological construct. For preimperial thinkers, the Sage Monarch embodied an almost unattainable ideal of impeccably moral and intelligent political leadership; he was the one who was expected to bring the ultimate peace, tranquility, and prosperity. Yet this idealized figure of a future savior was hijacked by the ruthless First Emperor of Qin, who boldly proclaimed himself Sage, and elevated himself to super-human dimensions, thereby dwarfing his subjects. Later rulers rejected the First Emperor's hubris, but continued the appropriation of the position of the Sage Monarch, thereby strengthening the foundations of the monarchic system. Fundamentally, this association of the Monarch and the Sage continued throughout the imperial millennia and remained one of the pivotal aspects of traditional political culture. The omnipotent savior-like figure of the Sage Monarch turns everybody into "child-like subjects" and prevents emergence of a "citizen" consciousness. Liu Zehua summarizes his exploration of sage monarchs with the harsh verdict "Unless sage monarchs die out, the great turmoil cannot be stopped."¹³ And, as Liu Zehua never says explicitly but repeatedly hints at, this combination of

spiritual and political power remained intact in the postimperial period, peaking under Mao Zedong, the absoluteness of whose authority would remain inconceivable unless the legacy of the idea of the Sage Monarch is considered.¹⁴

The idea—and the ideal—of the Sage Monarch stands at the heart of the monarchic mind-set, which characterized preimperial thinkers and remained fundamentally intact throughout the imperial millennia. Liu Zehua explores multiple facets of the impact of this mind-set on the functioning of the imperial order. He goes beyond political essays per se to investigate official histories, court memorials, the emperors' appellations, and the like. He notices repeated eulogies dedicated to even the most benighted and inadequate sovereigns, and contrasts these with self-humiliating language employed by even the most courageous and critical-minded literati when facing the throne. He cautions not to ignore conventional expressions and the court routine: these are part of contemporaneous political discourse and are reflective of the society's modes of thought no less than political and philosophical writings. By incorporating a huge variety of textual sources from different periods and written by different individuals, Liu Zehua demonstrates time and again that monarchism, namely, the adoration of sage monarchs and the impossibility of conceiving a nonmonarchic form of rule, permeates the entire intellectual culture of traditional China. Monarchism becomes a singularly important aspect of this culture, its core; without being aware of this, scholars are not able to grasp some of the fundamental patterns of Chinese history.

Liu Zehua's repeated emphasis on monarchism as China's predicament may easily lead to a misperception of Chinese culture as dimly despotic, a caricature of Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism*.¹⁵ Yet a cautious historian knows well how wrong that caricature is: after all, despite—or perhaps because of?—its unwavering commitment to the monarchic political system, Chinese culture produced multiple counterbalances to despotism, such as the right to criticize the monarch and remonstrate with him, the idea of “the people as a root” of the polity (*min ben*), and even the extreme concept of “righteous rebellion” or “replacing the [Heaven's] Decree” (*ge ming*). Yet Liu Zehua considers these ideas not as contradicting monarchist

thought but rather as being essential to its functioning: he argues that together with the fundamental premises of monarchism, these ideas form the so-called yin-yang structure of paired contradictory propositions (e.g., “the people as a root” versus “the ruler as a root” of the polity). As his seminal article on the topic, “The Yin-Yang Structure of Traditional Chinese Political Thought” (the fifth article in the present issue), demonstrates, in the “yin-yang structure,” the “yang” proposition (e.g., “the ruler as a root”) occupies the leading (“core”) position, while the “yin” proposition allows for flexibility and adjustability of the system. The coexistence and mutual connection between the ostensibly contradictory propositions explain the resilience of Chinese political culture and its ability to cope with manifold challenges and periods of malfunction without dispelling fundamental beliefs in the superiority of the Sage Monarch and in the desirability of monarchic rule.

Polemics with “New Confucians”

In the aftermath of the 1989 suppression of the student movement and a very brief and inconsequential resurrection of “Marxist orthodoxy,” starting in the early 1990s, China entered into a period of major ideological reshuffle. A few fundamental ideas that were the core of intellectual life under Mao Zedong, such as the supremacy of “class struggle” and promotion of egalitarian ideology, were cast away, while an intense search began for new values that would contribute to the country’s stability and the legitimacy of its political system in the post-Marxist era. This was the background for the resurrection of Confucianism as an increasingly popular alternative to either semibankrupt Marxism, or Western-type liberalism, or merely to the overwhelming ideological void that characterizes Chinese society during the current age of “being rich is glorious.” Many subtypes of Confucianism emerged, with some promulgated “from below” (or from abroad) and adopting a more critical stance toward the Leninist state, while others gained stronger state patronage and even official endorsement. Liu Zehua’s response to these developments is visibly negative and his criticism of what is perceived by some as a “Confucian revival” is becoming increasingly vociferous.

Liu Zehua's opposition to "New Confucianism" is twofold. One reason, which is understandably less explicit, is political. Justifiably or not, Confucianism is increasingly associated in China with conservative, antiliberal political trends, a reversal of the 1980s thaw. The conservative nature of a Confucian revival is strongly visible in the realm of ideology, as most New Confucians resolutely oppose the iconoclastic May Fourth Movement (1919) and its legacy. For Liu Zehua and other scholars who draw inspiration from the May Fourth Movement as a source of intellectual liberalization and ideological pluralism, this Confucian counterattack is highly unwelcome. In this context, a renewed debate over China's history, particularly the history of Chinese political thought and political culture, appears highly relevant to the present.

Another, and in my eyes more significant, reason for Liu Zehua's dissatisfaction with New Confucians is less related to Confucianism *per se* and more pertinent to the proliferation of uncritical views about the past in the Chinese intellectual community and among the general public. According to the new "patriotic" fashion, the past is presented in an increasingly affirmative way as the source of the nation's "five-millennia-old" glory; the unpleasant pages of China's history are glossed over, and critical approaches toward intellectual legacy of either the imperial or preimperial age are visibly receding. Embellishment of the past is evident not just on a quasi-official level (e.g., in museums) and on a popular level (movies, television serials, etc.), but also on the academic level, as an increasing number of incomprehensibly laudatory accounts of China's past in general and its traditional political culture in particular are being published annually.¹⁶ For a critical historian such as Liu Zehua, these accounts are no less annoying than the vehement attacks on traditional values during the Cultural Revolution. They flatten Chinese history, distort understanding of the past, and are detrimental to the historical discipline in general. Liu Zehua's opposition to these trends is primarily that of a historian rather than that of a politically involved intellectual.

Polemics with New Confucians and other admirers of the past permeate Liu Zehua's publications. For instance, the primary impetus for his exploration of the concept of the "The Unity of Heaven

and Men, and China's Monarchism" (the fourth article in this issue) was the proliferation of laudatory views of this concept in several publications, which present this unity as "harmony with nature" and even as an instance of China's early ecological thought.¹⁷ The exploration of the concept of the "sage" and its relation to the "sage monarch" (the third article in this issue) was prompted by the idealization of the sages as the epitome of the "rational and humanistic spirit" of Chinese thought in some publications. Yet Liu Zehua makes only a few hints to publications of his opponents and almost never mentions them by name. This self-restraint is not incidental: it echoes sensitivities from the times of the Cultural Revolution when many scholars were attacked *ad hominem* with disastrous consequences. In light of this traumatic experience, Liu Zehua remains very cautious in criticism of his opponents.

In recent years, rules of engagement in the Chinese academy are changing. Some of the younger scholars, less prone to be haunted by Cultural Revolution memories, do not hesitate to engage their opponents directly, and the Internet provides a much broader arena for personal attacks and counterattacks than was possible in the age of printed publications only. Liu Zehua himself is targeted by some of the critics, and his replies, albeit still avoiding direct reference to opponents, become ever more acerbic. The sixth and last of the articles collected in this issue, "A Few Questions Regarding Promotion of National Studies," is based on one of Liu Zehua's public talks, in which he ridicules the proposal to reestablish "National Studies" (*guoxue*) as a recognized field of learning. Being a polemical piece, this article differs in tone from earlier publications; it is suggestive of an increasingly open and polarized intellectual atmosphere in the field of Chinese historical studies.

Liu Zehua's assault on "National Studies" can also be viewed as part of his lifelong project of liberating Chinese thinking from the burden of the past. By turning every historical phenomenon in China's early and recent past into an object of inquiry, by subjecting each of the major terms that have shaped intellectual discourse to comprehensive and systematic scrutiny, by dispelling "forbidden zones" and "sages" of the past and the present, Liu Zehua aims at completing the task started by critical Chinese scholars at the

turn of the twentieth century. Leaving behind the framework of traditional modes of thought based on the “yin-yang structure” of contradictory yet also complementary propositions, and departing from the framework of a traditional political culture overshadowed by the towering figure of the Sage Monarch—these are the essential remedies that Liu Zehua offers to China at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Some may agree with his recipes, while others will look for different solutions, but no scholar dealing with political thought and political culture of traditional China can ignore Liu Zehua’s lasting impact.

Notes

1. For instance, Li Zhenhong, the editor of *Shixue yuekan* (Historiography Monthly) has identified “Liu Zehua current” together with “Hou Wailu [1903–1987] current” as two of the most prominent “currents” (*xue pai*) in the studies of Chinese intellectual history (Li, “Zhongguo sixiang shi yanjiu zhong de xuepai, huayu yu huayu” [Currents, Discourses, and Domains of Discourse in Studies of China’s Intellectual History], *Shixue yuekan* [Historiography Monthly] 11 [2010]: 119–123). Chen Ming, a self-proclaimed cultural conservative, singles out Liu Zehua as the most formidable opponent of conservatives in his “Rujia de xianshi yiyi yu lishi zuoyong lueshuo—Jian bo Liu Zehua suo wei wangquanzhuyi xushi” (A Glance at the Real Meaning and Historical Role of Confucianism: Simultaneously Refuting the So-Called Monarchic Ideology Narrative of Liu Zehua), *Xueshu jie* (Academics in China) 6 (2008): 104–109.

2. For this period, see Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Shoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 337–357.

3. Liu Zehua’s memories from that period were recently published in Liu Zehua, “‘Wenge’ zhong de jingen, cuowei yu zizhu yishi de mengsheng—Yantao lishi de sixiang zishu zhi er” (Blind Adherence, Erroneous Judgments, and Seeds of Autonomous Consciousness During the Cultural Revolution: Self-Narration of My Thoughts About Exploring History, Part 2), *Shixue yuekan* (Historiography Monthly), no. 11 (2012): 97–101.

4. For an excellent depiction of that period and of the intellectuals’ role in ensuring Deng Xiaoping’s restoration to power, see Roderick MacFarquhar, “The Succession to Mao and the End of Maoism, 1969–82,” in *The Politics of China, 1949–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 248–339 (see discussion on pp. 311–327).

5. The most systematic discussion of the “Ideology of Monarchism Scholarly Current” (*wangquanzhuyi xuepai*) is in Li Zhenhong, “Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang shi yanjiu zhong de wangquanzhuyi xuepai” (The Scholarly Current of the Ideology of Monarchism in Studies of the History of Chinese Political Thought), *Wen shi zhe* (Literature, History, Philosophy) 4 (2013): 5–28.

6. Liu Zehua, Wang Maohe, and Wang Lanzhong, *Zhuanzhi quanli yu Zhongguo shehui* (Dictatorial Power and China's Society) (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1988) (reprinted by Tianjin guji chubanshe in 2005, with a new introduction by Liu Zehua).

7. These insights have been incorporated in Liu Zehua's magnum opus, *Zhongguo de Wangquanzhuyi* (China's Monarchism) (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 2000), especially pp. 19–25.

8. Liu Zehua, *Xian Qin zhengzhi sixiang shi* (History of Pre-Qin Political Thought) (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1984), pp. 173–174.

9. For major introductory-level books, see *History of Pre-Qin Political Thought*, *Zhongguo gudai zhengzhi sixiang shi* (History of Early Chinese Political Thought) (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1991) and the three-volume *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang shi* (History of Chinese Political Thought) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1996); two latter books were coauthored with other scholars.

10. *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang fansi* (Reflections on Traditional Chinese Thought) (Beijing: Sanlian, 1987); *Zhongguo chuantong zhengzhi siwei* (Modes of Traditional Chinese Political Thought) (Changchun: Jilin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991).

11. See Liu Zehua, *China's Monarchism*, pp. 175–181 and *passim*.

12. Later, Liu Zehua's ideas were summarized in the magnum opus *China's Monarchism* (2000).

13. See the ending phrases of the third article in the current issue.

14. Liu Zehua explores Mao's position as a Sage Monarch more explicitly in his "Political and Intellectual Authority: The Concept of the 'Sage Monarch' and Its Modern Fate," in *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China*, ed. Yuri Pines, Paul Goldin, and Martin Kern (forthcoming).

15. For Wittfogel's views, see Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). This book was translated into Chinese and published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1989. I am not aware of its direct impact, if any, on Liu Zehua's thought.

16. For just one example of such a laudatory account, see, Cao Deben et al., *Zhongguo chuantong zhengzhi wenhua de xiandai jiazhi* (Modern Value of Traditional Chinese Political Culture) (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2006). See also the quotation from the New Confucian "Jiashen Culture Manifesto" in the sixth article in this issue.

17. For perpetuation of these views, see, for example, Cao Deben, *Modern Value of Traditional Chinese Political Culture*, pp. 26–27.