Wang Hui, chief editor of China’s leading intellectual monthly Dushu (‘Reading’), was born in 1959 in the city of Yangzhou, where he graduated from the Teachers’ College before moving to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing in 1985. There, after completing his doctoral work, he became a research fellow in its Institute of Literature. After the events of 1989 he was sent to the mountainous countryside of Sha’anxi on the borders of Henan and Hubei, one of the poorest regions in China, for a year. Returning to his post in Beijing in late 1990, he published his first book Revolt against Despair—Lu Xun and his World. This study of the central figure in modern Chinese literature was widely greeted for its break with the standard interpretations of Lu Xun, whether inspired by ‘progressive’ or ‘conservative’ orthodoxies. Wang Hui’s portrait of Lu Xun stressed his debts to the thought of Stirner and Nietzsche, and the paradoxes of his support for the cause of a social revolution which would yet have to be opposed, once it was victorious, in the spirit of Stirner’s radically asocial values.

Three years later, a collection of essays on the May Fourth movement and its echoes in Chinese history, entitled No Room for Hesitation in a Void, confirmed Wang Hui’s reputation as one of the most independent minds to appear in the nineties. When the editorship of Dushu fell vacant in 1996, he was picked to take over the journal. A year later, his Self-Selected Essays proved an influential collection for younger intellectuals in the PRC. By this time, he had begun challenging what had become mainstream opinions among the Chinese intelligentsia, not to speak of official doctrines, about the present and future of the country. A central essay, ‘Contemporary Chinese Thought and the Question of Modernity’, was published abroad in Social Text in the summer of 1998. His collected writings on the theme of ‘modernization’ have since appeared under the title Rekindling Frozen Fire (1999). The sharp social criticism contained in these unsettled the ranks of marketeers, amidst indignant complaints that China is now faced with the phenomenon of a ‘New Left’. By the spring of 2000 this term had acquired general currency, as controversies within the Chinese intelligentsia about the direction the country should take assumed a vehemence not seen since the interwar years. Wang Hui has been at the centre of this storm, in the course of which he has just published a two-volume study of The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought.
What is the role of Dushu in Chinese intellectual life, and how do you conceive your position in it as editor?

The first issue of Dushu was published in April 1979. Its leading article was entitled ‘No Forbidden Zone in Reading’, and you could say that has been the spirit of the journal from the beginning. This is how we do our editorial job today, and we will never change it in the future. The first editor of Dushu came from the Commercial Publishing House in Beijing, historically the most important imprint in modern China. A year later, Fan Yong—a progressive publisher with close links to the intellectual world since the forties—took over. I think he was the most significant figure in the history of the journal, making it a key forum for new ideas and debates in the eighties. From 1979 to 1984, most of these were raised by an older generation of scholars or open-minded official intellectuals, like Li Honglin, Wang Ruoshi and others. It was they, for example, who took up the issue of the relations between Marxism and humanism. Then around 1985 a younger levy of intellectuals took centre stage. Among the most active were the Editorial Committee of Culture: China and The World, a series of translations aiming to introduce classics of modern thought from abroad, most of them produced by the Sanlian Press, which is also the publisher of Dushu. The journal ran many reviews of these books, which attracted a lot of attention from university students, graduates and fledgling intellectuals. There was an enthusiastic reception of modern Western philosophy, social theory and economic thought. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Cassirer, Marcuse, Sartre, Freud, not to speak of modernization theory and neo-classical economics were eagerly canvassed in the articles of the time. There was some resistance to all this, since the style in which these notices were written was often criticized as too difficult or obscure. Looking back, one can see that this
younger generation was more interested in introducing new theories, without any necessary political bearing, whereas the older generation had a much closer relation to politics. In this phase *Dushu* was not a radical journal—it was relatively detached from the political ferment of the late eighties. But an intellectual space for further discussion was created, which was not without significance in 1989.

That year saw a turning point. Whereas there was a high turnover of editors in other periodicals by late 1989, there was no change at *Dushu*, whose chief editor Shen Changwen carried on till 1996. This was partly just because the journal had played little direct political role in the preceding years. But in the general atmosphere of conservatism and dogmatism after 1989, *Dushu* now stood out as more open-minded. Of course there were pressures on the journal, and after Deng Xiaoping’s visit to southern China in 1992, a wave of consumerism and commercialization swept the country. In these conditions, Shen shifted editorial policy towards articles that were easier to read, with less academic discussions, to boost sales. Circulation rose from 50,000 to over 80,000 in five or six years, but while the journal became more popular, it was also criticized for failing to reflect the development of intellectual research in the country. Actually, it was still introducing new themes like Orientalism or post-colonialism, and continued to be widely viewed as a symbol of elite culture. But the changes in *Dushu* in the early nineties did mark a new tension between popular culture and high culture in China.

In 1996 I was invited to be a chief editor—joined a year later by my colleague Huang Ping. Since then, our policy has been to keep a readable style for the journal, but to move it away from consumerist preoccupations back to real intellectual discussion, and to expand its range beyond literature and the humanities to the social and natural sciences, including subjects never touched on before like archaeology or historical geography. We have launched a series of major debates on the fate of rural society, ethics, Asia, war and revolution, financial crisis, liberalism, law and democracy, nationalism, feminism. Most of these issues—the current crisis of rural society, for example—were raised for the first time in contemporary China in our pages, and other journals then followed. We carry opinions from right across the political spectrum. I should say that, as chief editor, I publish my own articles in other periodicals, to safeguard the impartiality of the journal. Our roster of contributors has expanded substantially, and many of the newer ones have made their
names writing for us. All this has made *Dushu* a focus of lively controversy, and increased its readership to between 100,000 and 120,000.

_The internet seems to have exploded this year as a medium of discussion in China. What changes, for good or for bad, is this bringing to the exchange of ideas, especially among the younger generation?_

Yes, this has been a major development. All kinds of different forces are now finding an outlet on the net, and even the Chinese government has stepped in with—not very successful—efforts to regulate it. The internet has brought three significant gains. It creates a space in which direct discussions between mainland and overseas Chinese intellectuals become possible, as a zone beyond the borders of nation-states. Secondly, it allows a lot of directly political issues to be addressed, which the print media in the mainland cannot touch. Thirdly, it spreads information from local levels very quickly across the country, which otherwise would not get national attention. So it offers the possibility of linking local, national and international spaces. But its limitations remain obvious too. The information it purveys is not beyond regulation by various forces. Since much of it is impossible to check, we often have no means of knowing whether something is true or false. The net is also an ideal medium for intervention without responsibility, encouraging personalized attacks and reckless vituperation under cover of anonymity. At the same time, it does not lend itself easily to theoretical discussions, which are still more or less the preserve of print journals in China, though some are now setting up their websites and we can expect more interaction between the two media. Still, the internet has certainly played a role in the intensification of polemical exchanges this year, with new camps springing to life on the most pressing issues of the day.

*Looking at the political field, during the eighties the Chinese scene was conventionally divided into two categories—reformers and conservatives, a dichotomy with its own built-in valuations of the two. At some point in the nineties, terms changed, and people started to talk about liberals and then, more recently still, a New Left. What lies behind this development?*

Towards the end of the seventies, the terms ‘conservatives’ and ‘reformers’ indicated, respectively, holdovers from Mao’s last years—also derisively dubbed *fanshipai* or ‘Whatevers’—and supporters of Deng’s policies. At that time, it was figures like Hua Guofeng or Mao’s former
security chief Wang Donxing who were the conservatives, while theoreticians like Deng Liqun or Hu Qiaomu belonged to the reforming wing of the Party.¹ In the late seventies, Deng Liqun was quite radical: while Hua Guofeng was still Chairman of the CCP, he published some lectures in the Central Party School attacking the conservatives very sharply—even criticizing Mao himself. But after the ‘campaign against spiritual pollution’ in 1983, the political map changed. Hu Qiaomu published a famous article about socialist humanism, attacking Zhou Yang, Wang Ruoshi, Su Shaozhi and other—generally more open-minded—intellectuals within the Party, who had taken up this slogan; and the perception of Deng Liqun changed too.² Once Hu Yaobang became General Secretary of the CCP, Hu Qiaomu and Deng Liqun were typecast as conservatives. But actually they had earlier been regarded as reformers themselves. All these people belonged to Deng Xiaoping’s camp. You can see the same kind of shift in categorizations of Li Peng, whom we considered the arch-conservative in 89. Known mainly as Zhou En-Lai’s adopted son, he became Vice Premier in the mid-eighties. His attitude was quite ambiguous at the time—it was not at all clear whether he was a conservative or a radical reformer. The distinction between the two stances was plain for all to see among the older generation of party leaders, but was much more blurred in this generation.

With the crackdown of 1989, it was ostensibly the conservatives who had taken power. But the label did not so easily lend itself to Deng Xiaoping. After June Fourth he held a series of talks with Yao Yilin, Li Peng and others at which he insisted on a continuation of his reform policies, and picked Jiang Zemin to be his successor, as a politician milder than Li Peng but stronger than Zhao Ziyang.¹ So in the nineties, it became very difficult to give any real content to the categories of reformer or con-

¹ Hua Guofeng was Mao’s short-lived official successor as Chairman of the CCP (1976–78). In 1978 Hu Qiaomu—Mao’s secretary during the Yan’an period—and Deng Liqun were respectively President and Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

² Zhou Yang—once Mao’s chief functionary for literature—was a victim of the Cultural Revolution; Wang Ruoshi was then deputy chief editor of The People’s Daily, Su Shaozhi director of the Institute for Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

³ Yao Yilin was director of the State Planning Commission in the late eighties; Zhao Ziyang was General Secretary of the CCP from 1987 to 1989.
servative. In one sense, the whole ‘reform policy’ became more radical than in Zhao Ziyang's time. There were no longer any voices to be heard against it within the power structure. Li Peng himself as Premier carried out many drastic reforms, at Deng’s prompting.

It was against this background that a change in Chinese political vocabulary started to occur. We can date its beginnings from around 1993. In the spring of 1992 Deng Xiaoping made a trip to Shenzhen in the South, where he gave the signal for an all-out drive for market-led modernization of the PRC economy. The immediate result was a run-away consumer boom—with high inflation—in Shanghai, Guangdong and even Beijing. This outcome of the Southern tour shocked a lot of intellectuals. Most of them had initially welcomed the energetic new burst of reform policies. But when they saw the rampant commercialization of all structures of daily life and culture that followed them, they started to feel a certain disillusion. In the eighties the mainstream outlook of Chinese intellectuals had been—in the phrase of the time—a ‘New Enlightenment’ very favourable to the Open Door priorities and marketizing thrust of Deng’s rule. Two debates now began to alter these parameters. In 1993 the Hong Kong journal Twenty-First Century published an article by a young Chinese economist at MIT, Cui Zhiyuan, under the title ‘A Second Emancipation’. It argued that if the first intellectual emancipation had been from orthodox Marxism, there should now be a second one, from the rote assumptions of the New Enlightenment. Cui drew on three different strands of thought: critical legal studies in the US, analytical Marxism in the West, and theories of a New Evolution. For Chinese readers, the startling feature of his essay was its calm reference to analytical Marxism—not that anyone much knew what the term meant: it was just the use of the term ‘Marxism’ itself, long a virtual taboo for many intellectuals. Cui Zhiyuan went on to collaborate with Roberto Unger in a series of articles on the fate of the Russian reforms, as an admonition to would-be reformers in China. At the same time, another young scholar working in the States, Gan Yang, was publishing articles in Twenty-First Century on township and village enterprises, as a form of property neither state nor private, but intermediate between the two, as the distinctive Chinese path to modernity. So the first break with the consensus came from overseas students.
However, the following year saw another important debate, this time in *Dushu*, when a number of leading intellectuals attacked the increasing commercialization of life in China as destructive of its ‘humanistic spirit’. The topic was launched by scholars from Shanghai, logically enough, since Shanghai is the biggest consumer centre in China and its intellectuals were shocked earlier and more deeply than their counterparts in Beijing by the ruthless wave of commercialization after Deng’s Southern tour. Not that these intellectuals were hostile to the market as such. Rather, they lamented that Chinese marketization failed to live up to the standards set in Europe and America. Some tried to trace its deficiencies back to Weber’s argument that Protestantism is essential to the true spirit of capitalism. An ideal capitalism should, they felt, be compatible with a humanistic spirit. The underlying attitude was fairly unpolitical—behind it lay the offended dignity of scholars in the humanities. But they were now becoming aware that marketization in China relied on a political system that in their eyes remained unchanged.

Independently—actually a little earlier—the group around the journal *Xueren* (‘The Scholars’), with which I was associated, had raised some critical issues, looking back at the June Fourth movement. They found that the intellectuals of the New Enlightenment, who had exercised a great influence on the June Fourth movement, in practice knew very little about Chinese history. Rather than studying Chinese realities, they had simply imported Western ideas into the reform process. That was a big mistake. We thought it was essential to reflect very carefully on modern Chinese history, and started to look at the professional scholarship that had studied it. Most of this was quite traditional, and we went on to propose other methods.

This was the context in which talk started of a ‘New Left’, more critical of capitalism and more aware of the Yeltsin experience than the New Enlightenment. So far as I know, the first appearance of the term was in a short report in *Beijing Youth Daily*. I didn’t use any such phrase myself, simply stressing the need for critical analysis of Chinese realities. Then I saw the report, which spoke of a new Marxism and the ideas of a New Left, in quite a positive tone. Since, however, the editor of *Beijing Youth Daily* was a supporter of the theory that China needed a New Authoritarianism, I suspected the term New Left was just being used as a cudgel to belabour liberals. That is one of the reasons why I have been hesitant to employ it in the Chinese context myself.
Was the term ‘liberal’ already in widespread usage?

Not yet in its current sense. The government, of course, had waged a campaign against ‘bourgeois liberalism’ in 1986, not to speak of 1983. But the term was still used much in the way Mao had employed it in Yan’an, to refer to personal misbehaviour and lack of discipline. For its part the New Enlightenment did not take liberalism, understood in a more classical sense, as a model. It tended to appeal to a different kind of socialism. Fang Lizhi, for example, on coming back from a trip to Scandinavia, advocated a Nordic socialism in the tradition of Bernstein for China. The leading philosopher Li Zehou defined himself as a Marxist, not a liberal. Wang Yuanhua, editor of the journal New Enlightenment, claimed to be a Marxist. Su Shaozhi published research on Yugoslav, Polish and Hungarian reforms. At the time, the inspiration of this generation was still socialist rather than liberal. The one significant exception was the political scientist Yan Jiaqi, who did look back to the European Enlightenment, the time of the American Constitution and the early phase of the French Revolution, and was concerned with the division of powers in the liberal tradition of government. But in general, from the end of the seventies to the mid-eighties, the New Enlightenment—most of whose leading intellectuals were very close to the government—still spoke of the merits of socialism. It was in the late eighties that the atmosphere changed. By then Hayek’s works were more and more widely talked about, though few people had read them. Friedman was received enthusiastically by Zhao Ziyang. The economists advising the government were pressing for large-scale privatizations.

So the current self-identification of most Chinese intellectuals as ‘liberals’ dates from the nineties? In the eighties, no-one could openly say: ‘Yes, I am a liberal.’ But after 1989, the radicalization of official reform policies created a situation where the term could describe a mixture of support and criticism of the government—approval of marketization, but disapproval of censorship or violation of human rights. The basis of this attitude would be: we are liberal because we believe in liberty, and the precondition of liberty is the dominance of private property in society. Would it be correct to think this became a consensus?

Fang Lizhi: astrophysicist who became Vice President of the new Science and Technology University in Hefei, and leading liberal critic of the government, in the late eighties; now in exile.
Roughly, yes—but with many shades of opinion. Some of the Shanghai liberals were very uneasy about the commercialization of culture, for example—anxieties that came out in the ‘humanistic spirit’ debate. Others were worried about growing social inequalities. Actually, the self-definition of Chinese liberals didn’t crystallize fully until they discovered an intellectual opponent. The first stirrings of a more critical view of official marketization go back to 1993–94, as I’ve said. But it wasn’t till 1997–98 that the label New Left became widely used, to indicate positions outside the consensus. Liberals adopted the term, relying on the negative identification of the idea of the ‘Left’ with late Maoism, to imply that these must be a throwback to the Cultural Revolution. Up till then, they had more frequently attacked anyone who criticized the rush to marketization as a ‘conservative’—this is how Cui Zhiyuan was initially described, for example. From 1997 onwards, this altered. The standard accusatory term became ‘New Left’.

What accounts for the change?

It corresponded to a shift in the cultural atmosphere. As the nineties wore on, more and more voices could be heard criticizing the whole direction Chinese society was taking. Even some economists, a very orthodox community, could be heard doubting whether the country was on the right path—scholars like Yang Fan put forward a lot of data that made uncomfortable reading. In 1997 the Hainan journal Tianya published an essay I had written four years earlier—at that time no-one wanted to risk printing it—on the failure of successive versions of Chinese ‘modernization’, which ends with a sharp critique of the kind of capitalist modernity the Reform Era had offered the country. At first there was no open reaction, although I was vehemently taken to task in private, and various unflattering descriptions were circulated about me. The public response was silence, but there was a lot of talk about it. Then Twenty-First Century in Hong Kong published two or three articles by mainland intellectuals attacking me. This broke the ice, and several liberals followed up with hostile responses in the PRC press, mainly in Guangzhou. Part of the reason for this reaction was that, after a decade as a contributor, I was by now editor of Dushu, and some of its issues had contained material calculated to unsettle conventional wisdom among intellectuals. Circulation went up, though older-generation scholars like Li Shenzi and others, who were friends of mine, would ask me how I could run such articles. But these provoked a lot of discussion, in
which a younger generation became very interested. A collection of essays I published in the same year, mainly concerned with problems of Chinese modernity, sold pretty well. At Beijing University, teachers devoted semesters to discussing it with their students. In these new conditions, Gan Yang and Cui Zhiyuan got a real response to their writings in the mainland for the first time. Intellectually, 1997 was a turning point.

*A process of political differentiation has continued since?*

In 1998 the Asian financial crisis broke out. Naturally, this shook any blind faith in the world market. Suddenly capitalism did not seem such a sure-fire guarantee of stability and prosperity after all. Liberals were put on the defensive. But a much worse blow to them came in 1999, with the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. For many Chinese liberals, who are very pro-Western, it is virtually a reflex to approve any American initiative. So when there was a wave of indignation among ordinary Chinese and spontaneous demonstrations by students, with the government taking up the rear, they suddenly found themselves isolated. The feeling that they had lost credibility with students was especially painful. Some compared the outburst of popular anger to the Boxer riots, as expressions of an irrational xenophobia, while others blamed the New Left for encouraging a primitive nationalism, that could only strengthen the government. Very little of this found its way into the media, but a fund of suppressed tensions accumulated, which burst into the public domain this year, when the ‘New Left’ became the target for a violent liberal offensive. Actually, people like myself have always been reluctant to accept this label, pinned on us by our adversaries. Partly this is because we have no wish to be associated with the Cultural Revolution, or for that matter what might be called the ‘Old Left’ of the Reform-era CCP. But it’s also because the term New Left is a Western one, with a very distinct set of connotations—generational and political—in Europe and America. Our historical context is Chinese, not Western, and it is doubtful whether a category imported so explicitly from the West could be helpful in today’s China. This feeling was strengthened by the Balkan War. So many Western intellectuals describing themselves as on the ‘Left’ supported the NATO campaign that one couldn’t much wish to borrow the word from them. So rather than a New Left in China, I still prefer to speak of critical intellectuals. But the term has probably come to stay.
Historically, the terms Left and Right have tended to buckle and twist into strange shapes in late communist or post-communist societies. In Gorbachev’s Russia, which had undergone no Cultural Revolution, the term ‘Left’ was for a time widely used for Friedmanite reformers who wished to push the country rapidly towards capitalism, as against ‘conservatives’ attached to the old system. It was not until quite late in the Yeltsin period that this reversal of meaning tilted back into a more familiar classification, when Gaidar and his fellow liberals—who freely described themselves as ‘lefts’ at the turn of the nineties—formed a Union of Right Forces to contest Duma elections. It seems that today in China, after a long period in which neither term had any currency, the idea of a—New—Left has resurfaced. What about a Centre or Right? Have these terms been reclaimed too, or are they still empty boxes waiting for the appropriate forces to take possession of them?

No-one has claimed them so far. But that doesn’t mean they fail to correspond to actual positions. A good many of our liberals represent a contemporary Chinese Right. This is especially true of the economists who advocate privatization and marketization without any doubts or limits, without the slightest critical distance. They have taken the idea from Hayek that the market is a spontaneous economic order. In China, they maintain, marketization is the only route to prosperity and democracy—not that they care greatly whether there is a democracy or not, but it is required as a rhetorical add-on. Typically, these people work with the big companies and the government. Someone like Fan Gang, from my generation, would be a representative example. Other liberals, on the other hand, occupy a Centre position. They have discovered marketization in China does not generate a spontaneous economic order—since the market is not free, but determined through and through by political monopolies and official corruption. So they are highly critical of current realities, and call for social justice along with economic growth. On the other hand, at least until recently, they tended to idealize marketization abroad—not just in Europe or America, but in Eastern Europe and Russia as well—as the ‘good’ path that China has missed. He Qinglian and Qin Hui represented this position. Qin Hui wrote several articles idealizing the Czech and Russian privatization schemes as the distribution of an equal economic starting-point to all citizens.5

5 For He Qinglian, see her article ‘China’s Listing Social Structure’, NLR 5, September–October 2000. Qin Hui: agrarian economist at Qinghua University.
How would the Left’s position on these economic and social questions be defined?

There are a number of different perspectives. Cui Zhiyuan, for example, emphasizes the need for institutional and theoretical inventiveness, and calls for a ‘republican’ combination of distinct principles of political order, and diverse systems of economic property. He has written various articles in the *Journal of Strategy and Management* and other magazines on these themes. His main concern is that a balance should be kept between central and local government, market and planning principles. His basic standpoint does not seem so radical to me. But liberals regard any criticism of the way the central government has ceded so many fiscal and other powers to the provinces—a development that has caused very grave problems—with the greatest alarm. More generally, the characteristic focus of what the liberals call the New Left is the nexus between the market and the state: that is, the relationships between interest groups and power structures, economic forms and political systems. Markets themselves are no novelty in China. Traditional Chinese society had huge regional and interregional markets, with a series of distinctive features that have been analysed by historians of the Chinese economy. In the nineteenth century, the process of market formation was for the first time associated with the colonial pressures of world capitalism. That meant the market had to be organized by the state in a new way, with the establishment of a customs organization for the regulation of foreign trade, as a condition of sovereignty. The late twentieth century saw far greater state intervention to mould and create markets, under the pressures of globalization.

*But how far does such a focus really differentiate a New Left from a liberal Centre? Many critical liberals insist no less strongly on the power-political determination of markets, and the need to correct the social injustices that flow from it in China.*

The difference is quite deep. Liberals of this sort support marketization of the economy as the only correct road for China. In their eyes, it is only the absence of political reform that warps the workings of the market—but if the constitution were revised to protect the rights of the citizen, then we would have a reasonably equal society and a satisfactory degree of social justice. In my view, that is an illusion. Political democracy will not come from a legally impartial market, secured by constitutional
amendments, but from the strength of social movements against the existing order, and the interaction between these movements, public discussions and institutional innovation. This point is central to the genealogy of the critical intellectual work that is now identified as a New Left. We have certainly learnt a lot from Western experiences and theories, but we refuse the implication that all the issues now raised by critical intellectuals come from America or Europe. On the contrary, they are in continuity with the social mobilizations in China during the late eighties. In 1989, why did the citizens of Beijing respond so strongly and actively to the student demonstrations? It was largely because of the so-called double-track price system and the unequal way in which wage contracts were introduced. These provided the institutional base for growing social differentiation, official speculation and large-scale corruption in the late eighties. At that time, the government had twice imposed adventurist reforms on the price system, generating inflation without any benefit to ordinary people. Their earnings suffered from the agreements they were forced to sign by factories, and their jobs were at risk. People felt the inequality created by the reforms: there was real popular anger in the air. That is why the citizenry poured onto the streets in support of the students. The social movement was never simply a demand for political reform, it also sprang from a need for economic justice and social equality. The democracy that people wanted was not just a legal framework, it was a comprehensive social value. It was this great explosion of popular feeling at the end of the eighties that is the historical background to the work of critical intellectuals in the nineties.

You can see the gulf between this way of looking at the market and the neo-liberal view of it. For the neo-liberals, the price system of a free market is the signalling mechanism of a spontaneous order of exchange, as opposed to the distortions of central planning. But the failures of Zhao Ziyang showed that the price system is never a spontaneous order. It is always instituted and managed. People felt that, and revolted against it. But after the armed crackdown on the June Fourth movement people lost their chance to protest, and price reform introduced at gunpoint became a success. All-out marketization in China did not originate from spontaneous exchange but from acts of violence—state repression of the social movement. We can see the same logic if we look at the foreign side of the picture. For the market as a system has never been just a domestic question within China. The PRC has always been involved in foreign trade: with the USSR and Eastern Europe in the fifties and early
sixties, and even during the Cultural Revolution with the outside world through Hong Kong. But the Open Door policies of Deng Xiaoping demanded a much deeper insertion of China into the world market. How did that happen? A key step in the process was China’s invasion of Vietnam in 1978. One reason for this otherwise senseless attack on a small neighbour was the desire for a new relationship with the United States. The invasion was offered as political gift to Washington, and became China’s entrance ticket to the world system. Here too violence was the precondition of a new economic order.

The neo-authoritarians of the late eighties and neo-liberals of the late nineties never mention the war against Vietnam; and by the mid-nineties they were often criticizing the June Fourth movement as too radical. They focus on the need for basic political freedoms, and there we can agree. But as soon as one moves from general principles to particular issues, the differences become apparent. They want to separate the political and economic realms, whereas we argue that the problems of each are intertwined—you cannot always distinguish between them, or say which is more decisive. For example, when we argued that it was very important that peasants should become involved in village elections, where official candidates can be defeated, Liu Junning, a young star of our political science, replied ‘We don’t need that—these elections are totally corrupted; what matters are congressional and judicial reforms’. It is true that there is a lot of corruption in these elections. But the question is whether we still believe in the participation of the masses in political reform.

*Have these differences crystallized into articulated programmes yet?*

People often ask us: ‘But what is your positive alternative?’ The truthful answer is that we have no total project of reform to hand, because we don’t believe in trying to work out an ideal order in advance of concrete social demands. When social movements do emerge, we should study very closely what sorts of reasons bring ordinary people into them. In 1989, for example, it is clear that socialist values were still alive for many citizens, and informed the ideas of democracy and freedom much more than liberal doctrines. So in that case we have to look back at the history of Chinese society since 1949, which is not exhausted by the dictatorship of the CCP or the failures of central planning, but contained other features as well to which people were attached. In the fifties and sixties, for example, there was a system of co-operative medical insurance in rural
areas which meant that local people organized themselves to help each other, setting up funds and providing services. Since the state-run health system is now collapsing, why don’t we learn some positive lessons from this? There are still some socialist fragments in China today, which few of us have thought seriously about. Cui Zhiyuan once tried to say something about the Anshan experience, but he confused most of his readers and lost the debate that followed. But I think his basic impulse was right. We should look with an open mind at historical practices of the past, without trying to copy them. An unprejudiced intellectual curiosity is something all Chinese intellectuals need today.

What is your view of China’s township and village enterprises? Various observers—you mentioned Cui Zhiyuan, but this is a view quite widely shared in the West—have argued that these are the really original institutions to emerge in the reform period, as forms of collective but not state ownership that have proved economically very dynamic. Other scholars in China and abroad believe they are already crypto-capitalist companies, typically controlled by corrupt local bosses, often colluding with foreign investors in throwing environmental concerns to the winds in the search for quick profits. How do you assess them?

Historically the TVEs were a real success for a certain period, and their creation was a great achievement. But we should be sceptical of the larger claim made for them, that they represent a Chinese model of development that offers an alternative to the world market system. They owed much of their success to the dual price structures that came into force with the early reforms. On the one hand, the large state enterprises were forced to sell raw materials like iron and steel at low prices. The TVEs, on the other hand, could use these inputs to market goods at higher, uncontrolled prices. Naturally, if they showed any competence, they could prosper; and many proved genuinely able and flexible enterprises. Many also benefited from effective tax exemption. Whereas state enterprises bore a double burden of tax, as late as 1998 only about a third of TVEs paid any taxes at all. With these advantages, it is not surprising that a good number of them posted an impressive performance. But in recent years, they have entered into a deep crisis. Many have become private firms, others have merged with foreign capital. The

---

6 Anshan: iron-and-steel complex in Liaoning province, whose shopfloor creativity was hailed in the fifties.
ability of village enterprises to absorb labour on the land has declined, leading to greater rural influx into the cities.

How far is the growing social polarization between rich and poor, and the increase in unemployment, a matter of major public debate today?

For several years now there has been a big debate about social polarization among intellectuals, with many articles in journals and books about it. Some younger-generation thinkers have described current trends as a ruthless form of social Darwinism. Liberals of an older generation, scholars like Li Shenzhi and Zi Zhongyun, reply that China has unfortunately not known social Darwinism, but its opposite—socialism as the survival of the unfittest. So this issue is hotly debated in intellectual circles. In general, however, the mass media refuse to touch it. Unemployment is rather different. There have been quite a lot of articles about factory lay-offs in the newspapers, and what arrangements might be made for workers who lose their jobs; but there is very little discussion of the fate of peasants who drift to the city in search of work, and then become a floating population without employment or rights of residence.

Have there been major changes in the position of women in the labour market?

The basic trend is not unlike that in Eastern Europe and Russia in their reform periods—a reversion to an older division of labour, with a loss of employment and independence by women. But the process has not gone so far. Some corporations publicly refuse to take in female graduates from universities, while others are anxious to maintain a gender balance. There is no doubt that women’s social position overall is lower than men’s in the PRC, even if there are big differences in the size of the gap that exists in the cities and in the countryside. A significant development is the spread of prostitution once again, which has become a major tax resource for local governments, who give no protection to the women whose earnings they exploit. In cities like Guangzhou, you find a large number of young female workers in factories, paid miserable wages, without any form of public oversight.

Moving to the political field proper, would it be true to say that one reason for the still blurred boundaries between different intellectual camps in today’s
China is that people who disagree sharply about everything else still share at least one aim—they all want greater democracy?

Well, it is true that virtually all intellectuals would like more freedom of expression. It is understandable that intellectuals should care deeply about whether or not they can speak their minds freely. But they should also care about the—much larger number of—fellow-citizens who have lost their jobs or fallen into sickness or poverty, without anyone to look after them. The issue of democracy is so much broader than just the right of intellectuals not to suffer censorship. After the June Fourth movement was suppressed, many concluded that radicalism had undone it, and that there had to be some other way to democracy. The answer would lie in the gradual emergence of civil society from the development of the market economy. For marketization would produce a new middle class that could furnish the sturdy basis for civil associations, without directly antagonizing the state. The resulting civil society would then blossom into a democracy. These ideas were actually first developed by Taiwanese liberals in the eighties. My reaction was: ‘But what kind of civil society do you want? What sort of social structure do you have in mind?’

After various debates, some neo-liberals decided that China still lacks the social basis for a civil society, and therefore the priority is to unleash the market to create one. Turning to the right, they made it clear their concern was not democracy as such, but the market at whatever cost. A well-known economist once said: ‘Attacks on corruption are an attack on the market—we have to tolerate the one to develop the other’. In the mid-nineties, the group around Liu Junning publicly claimed that true liberalism is a form of conservatism, because of its belief in order. This is a very revealing shift of terms, since in the eighties and early nineties conservatism was always used as a pejorative term to describe anyone who was regarded as insufficiently enthusiastic about the market, or too willing to envisage a positive role for the state—the label was applied to people like Hu Angang or Cui Zhiyuan. Not all liberals, of course, have made such a sharp right turn. There are much more radical figures like Qin Hui, who continue to insist on the importance of social justice and—still more—political democracy. He argues that the Chinese regime basically remains Mao’s old socialist state, which we

---

7 Hu Angang: China’s outstanding critic of central-state fiscal weakness and regional polarization.
need to replace with a liberal democracy. To some extent I agree with this, because it is true that we need political democracy to solve virtually all other problems. But I don’t believe the current state is just a continuation of the old one. The country cannot be described as socialist, and the state itself has changed a lot. Today the state is itself part of the market system. In some ways it functions very well in that capacity—it makes mistakes, of course, but it is now a key factor in the dynamic of marketization. Qin Hui underestimates this.

*Turning to the cultural field, how far have questions of modernism and postmodernism been a focus of interest among Chinese intellectuals, and how far do positions on them correspond to points along the political spectrum?*

Postmodernism arrived in China when Fredric Jameson gave a course of lectures at Beida (Beijing University) in 1985, which were published as a book a year later under the title of *Cultural Theory and Postmodernism*. That was the beginning. The lectures had a big impact on his students, who included Zhang Yiwu and Zhang Xudong. At the same time another young scholar, Chen Xiaoming, decided to write a book applying postmodern categories and deconstructive techniques to the latest generation of semi-avant-garde writers like Yu Hua and Ge Fei. But these were still very small eddies. Then came June Fourth. Afterwards, most intellectuals fell silent for political reasons. But around 1992–94 Zhang Yiwu and Chen Xiaoming became quite active, contributing articles on postmodernism to journals like *The Literary Review*. They were impressed by the speed of marketization, and made a deduction from it rather like the theorists of civil society. Consumerism could be a kind of freedom: it would undermine dictatorship—which, of course, was partially true. After three years of silence, this caused quite a stir.

My generation found it much more difficult to analyse the new consumerism. They could see it was different from state socialism, and they sensed it was different from the liberalism with which most of them identified. It posed them with a dilemma: if we support market reform, how can we oppose consumerism, however objectionable some of its manifestations? The result was the debate on the ‘humanistic spirit’. Hard on its heels came a third discussion. In 1995 *Dushu* started to publish articles by Zhang Kuan, an overseas student, on Orientalism. Here was a theme that opened another door to the West, where Said had developed his theory, yet also offered a critique of the West, and so would not
offend the official ideology. The liberals were vulnerable on this score, since they could be criticized for accepting quasi-Orientalist premises in taking their model of democracy from the West. My own view differed from both camps, the liberals and their post-colonial critics. The latter were right that we should acquire a more critical understanding of the West, whose colonialist legacies have not disappeared, and which could never just be a model for us. On the other hand, a certain kind of insistence on the dangers of Orientalism could become a covert pretext for nationalism.

Around the same time, Huntington’s article, ‘The Clash of Civilizations’, provoked a lot of discussion—both Twenty-First Century and Strategy and Management devoted special issues to it. Liberal intellectuals criticized it very sharply for implying that conflict was inevitable between the West and China. The followers of Said argued that the extreme Right in the West was just confirming the Orientalist fixation with China as an alien, hostile land. The former rejected Huntington’s arguments as a distortion of the real—better—nature of the West, while the latter denounced them as an all too accurate expression of Western colonialism. In the background of these discussions of Said and Huntington was the political context of those years. In Moscow Yeltsin had pounded the Russian Parliament with tank-fire, to the applause of the United States. Naturally, ordinary Chinese asked: why is America’s reaction so different to its attitude to June Fourth in China? The hypocrisy of US foreign policy was starkly exposed. Then the West manoeuvred to ensure that the Olympic Games of 2000 were not held in China. Many intellectuals disliked the PRC’s application to stage the games, but it was popular with ordinary people, who were angered by Western obstruction. This was the atmosphere in which Said and Huntington became reference points.

My own view was that, in so far as Orientalism remained a predominantly cultural theory, it couldn’t handle a range of problems that were economically and politically pressing in China. It was too soft! In 1995 Li Shenzhi, described as the ‘patron of Chinese liberalism’ by the New York Times, published perhaps the first article in the PRC on globalization, which he essentially welcomed. In an indirect response I wrote a short piece in Dushu, assessing Samir Amin’s works—I had heard him talk in Denmark the year before—as a variant of dependency theory,

---

8 Li Shenzi: currently Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
from which we could learn something in China, without accepting his idea of ‘delinking’ from the world economy, which Mao had in a sense attempted. The article was very sharply criticized by Li Shenzhi, who said: ‘That article is so left-wing! How could you talk in that way?’ What I was talking about was the power of the world system, as another way of formulating ‘globalization’, and the need for democracy on a world scale to counter it.

What about theoretical discussions in the later nineties? Zhang Xudong has recently taken up the theme of postmodernism in a major essay, which develops at least two central arguments. Postmodernism, he maintains, is a theory and practice of what is hybrid and heterogeneous, and as such well suited to the mixed forms and realities of China’s economy and society. Where modernity was always conceived as a universal process, moving towards a single end-state, postmodernity does away with this teleology, opening up a horizon of different possible futures. To this intellectual liberation, freeing the Chinese mind from preordained norms and goals, there corresponds a popular emancipation in the postmodern culture of mass consumption—which can be seen as an ambiguous form of democratization: the entrance of ordinary people’s desires into the space of culture, through the market. What is your view of this argument?

There is an interval between the original introduction of postmodern themes by Zhang Yiwu and Chen Xiaoming—whose influence has declined in the last few years, though it was still significant enough to provoke a major debate in Twenty-First Century in 1996–97—and Zhang Xudong’s rewriting of these today. His intervention is in part a response to debates over modernity that have divided some liberal from critical intellectuals. Whatever the differences between Gan Yang, Zhang Xudong or myself, we share a sceptical attitude to the codified idea of modernity itself. Chinese liberals, on the other hand, tend to accept standard definitions of the Enlightenment uncritically, and take it for granted that modernity is our only possible goal. They refuse any reflection on it. Modernity—naturally, as it has emerged in the West—is simply assumed to be a model for China without frictions or self-contradictions, even as compared with Habermas, who remains attached to the project of modernity, but tries to see the tensions and

---

incompletions in it. My own position has always been that Chinese modernity was itself a self-critical project. If you look at the writings of Zhang Taiyan or Lu Xun, who were deeply committed to the modern movement, you find at the same time the resources for a critique of it. Against this background, I can understand why Zhang Xudong wanted to draw a firm line between liberal and critical views of modernity, and to uphold what he sees as the more open-minded standpoint of a post-modernity beyond it.

What is less easy for me to follow is why he should think that the market in China would be a force for democratization, or a check to the homogenizing pressures of the world system. The first part of this argument paradoxically becomes close to that of the liberals he criticizes. The second part seems self-contradictory to me. If one is critical of the world system, the American-dominated global market order, how can one avoid criticism of the Chinese market? Not only is the Chinese market locked into the world market—just as the Chinese state is integrated into the international system, as you can see from its role in the Security Council—but in so far as it is different, it is not necessarily better than the Western markets with which it is now interconnected. In some ways it is even worse. The Chinese state, of course, differs from Western states in a much more significant way, and Zhang Xudong is right to emphasize this. But we also need to see the extent to which the old system rested on monopoly structures that have since changed their form, without losing their role in allowing China to compete as a trading power within the world system.

In this argument about the significance of ideas of postmodernity for China, there is more than an echo of the famous Japanese debate, held in Kyoto in the forties, on ‘Overcoming Modernity’. The basic terms of the discussion are the same, for both sets of thinkers. Are we forced either to accept Western modernity or to retreat into Eastern tradition, as the only two possible choices? Or can we invent a future that escapes the terms of this dilemma, by creating something at once more rooted in local tradition and more powerfully modern than the modernity imposed on us from outside? This way of looking at the problem poses the question of contemporary uses of tradition very sharply. China has the longest continuous intellectual history of any society in the world. What is the range of attitudes to it in the PRC today—irrelevant? negative? positive? selective?—and how do they relate to the spectrum of political viewpoints?
Mao’s Revolution made much more of a clean sweep of traditional culture than anything that ever happened in Japan. So today, knowledge of pre-revolutionary Chinese culture remains comparatively thin among intellectuals—something the overseas diaspora has accentuated. The basic attitude of the liberals to the Chinese past is pretty negative. Their inspiration comes overwhelmingly from the West. This is also true of most of the intellectuals of the New Left, who have done very little research into pre-modern periods. The reference points may differ—the American Constitution or early French Revolution for one camp; American postmodernism or French deconstruction for the other—but the underlying outlook is quite similar. But there are scholars seriously engaged in these questions. It was to explore them in a new spirit that the journal *Xueren*, which I mentioned earlier, was formed. Most of those associated with it were working in the humanities—especially history, philosophy and literature. Many of them became professional historians, concentrated on their field and unwilling to draw wider conclusions from it. Their scholarship is good, even if their methodology may sometimes be old-fashioned: they do hard work on the documents and come up with important results. But of our previous group, there are now perhaps only four or five who are still trying to rethink the modern history of China in a spirit that connects it to contemporary problems.

Would it be right to think there is a particular problem in the appropriation of cultural tradition in China, stemming from the way in which classical Chinese has become a semi-dead language, creating a barrier somewhat like—if less radical than—the switch from Ottoman script to modern Turkish?

That is true. For the newer generations, it is a major obstacle. The very talented levy of young Chinese scholars now working in the States, for example, is largely cut off from the resources of the classical tradition. Most of them were trained in English departments in the PRC, and have little command of classical Chinese. But there is another problem, related to PRC culture itself. I often ask myself why we have no radical historiography of the British sort. Research into working-class or even peasant history is still very limited. The official Marxism of the PRC did talk about modes of production, classes, capitalism and so on, and had some achievements to its credit. But it was so mechanical as a framework that nowadays very few scholars pay much attention to it. So the
younger generation is divorced even from a quite recent tradition of writing about the past. The result has been a swing away from social to intellectual history, which is where the best work has been done for some time now.

How would you situate your own work in this context, especially The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought, whose first two volumes, Essence and Substance and The Making of Chinese Modernity, running from Song times to the early Republic, have appeared this year? What is most distinctive about it?

I have great respect for the kind of scholarship represented by Yu Yingshin and others, which could be described as a philosophical study of intellectual history, of neo-Confucian inspiration; as I do for the sort of social history practised by American historians like Ben Elman. But my focus differs from either. What I have tried to do is look at the connections between intellectual history and social history, over quite a long stretch of Chinese history—that is, the way ideas emerged and altered within a fabric of social practices and institutional changes. Without this double focus, taking the ideas and their settings equally seriously, there is the risk of a slide towards a mere account of ‘cultural production’. When I first started working on the project, I was interested mainly in thinkers of the late Qing period. I quickly realized their conceptions of knowledge, for example, were always intimately related to their occupational practices and to their understandings of the social structure and political order. So when they talk about cognitive issues, they always refer to politics, to ethics, and to their self-identity too. I also found that when they discussed political alternatives—notions of kinship as perhaps an equivalent of civil society in the West, or feudalism, or a new authoritarianism—they always used terms from long-standing intellectual traditions in China to develop or reinforce their current arguments. So I was forced to move back in time to trace the origins and transformations of these terms. In doing so, it became clear that the standard notion that modern times in China started in the Late Qing—only from that period does everything begin to change—is an illusion. A lot of things started much earlier. Tracing them back to Ming or Song times

---

is also a way of criticizing the claims capitalism makes for itself, as if it were the absolute origin of everything new, responsible for inventing the market, social mobility, intellectual curiosity or whatever. That is what explains the first volume, which is devoted to what might be called ideas of Reason, whereas the principal concern of the second volume is with ideas of Science.

The interweaving of past and present in the thought of even the most radical figures of the late Qing period is striking. Take Zhang Taiyan, for example. He was a first-class classical scholar, who was influenced by Fichte and Nietzsche, although he had difficulty reading them, and at the same time was deeply involved in Buddhism and Taoism. Around 1900 he was the editor of a revolutionary journal, Min Bao, the most important periodical produced by the Tongmenghui. In it, he published a lot of articles about Buddhism. For a younger generation, this was baffling. What has Buddhism got to do with the revolution? But for Zhang Taiyan, Buddhism was a source for the revolution, and at the time an expression of the revolution, indeed of modern history itself. This was the typical pattern. Yan Fu borrowed from Comte’s positivism, and combined it with neo-Confucianism. The choice of sources always had some political or economic implication at the time. So in studying these thinkers, I always tried to find what constituted their basic framework of knowledge—which would include their views of nature, the political structure, the family and their own identity.

The title of the second volume speaks for itself. My focus is on the origins of the Chinese reflections on modernity. If we look at Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao, Lu Xun or Yan Fu, we discover, in their world of thought and their relations to the surrounding reality, self-ironical, self-contradictory, self-paradoxical attitudes towards modernity. The sources they drew on were Western and Chinese, and—we should not forget—Japanese too. In the introduction, I suggest that we have to return to that point, the beginning of the modern, if we are to understand our problems today; and that when we do so, it becomes clear how much of what we think we know about the state, the individual, the market of that time—or ours—is a myth. The Chinese intellectuals of the period were facing very complex issues, which they tried to resolve

---

11 Yan Fu (1854–1921): translator, writer and reformer, champion of evolutionary theory.
in all kinds of unexpected ways. Lu Xun’s attitudes, for example, seem quite paradoxical. He criticized many Chinese traditions savagely; yet he was also an excellent classical scholar, who did fine work on texts from the remote past. He hated reaction, but he was curiously sceptical about progress itself. He became a writer of the Left, but he was always quite critical of the Left. Why? What was the intellectual and political background of these ambivalences? In 1907 Zhang Taiyan became the first person of significance to speak of a Republic of China, and drew a map of the boundaries of the future post-revolutionary state. Yet he also criticised the nationalist project very sharply, even while he was attacking the colonial powers. If his answers were never coherent, the questions he left are in a sense still with us. The questions this generation posed were much more complicated than those that preoccupy contemporary Chinese intellectuals. Why could they do that? It was possible only because they were not pure intellectuals, or scholars isolated in the academy. They were social activists. They sensed problems very acutely—different dangers, different potentials, different frameworks—even when they couldn’t articulate them so well. Because their work was often improvised and rough, it is virtually ignored by our intellectuals today, who are accustomed only to academic theories. But it is full of implications for us.

The project as you describe it sounds—if one wanted a Western analogy—as if it had something in common with Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society*, as an exploration of the historically changing meaning of a set of key terms. Of course, *Culture and Society* is a history of ideas in a fairly pure sense—it doesn’t say much about social practices or institutions, save at the end, when it suddenly shifts to the labour movement. That conclusion, however, made it an intellectual history with a strong contemporary charge. How do you envisage your project ending?

The third volume, for which I have started to collect the materials, will focus on rebellion and revolution. In China we have no strong tradition of scholarly research on either. What we have is much good research on the literati or scholar-gentry. There are some studies by historians like Qian Mu, highly conservative in their attitude towards the present, but capable of interesting work on the past. But there is much less of a canon in the area I want to enter now. The themes of rebellion and revolution remain more delicate topics for scholars.
Would it be wrong to think that the Chinese intellectual scene in the nineties has, despite a more restrictive political context, actually been livelier and more diversified than in the eighties? Could it in some measure be compared—in vigour of discussion, overlapping of positions, absence of rigid labels or definitions—to, say, stretches of the twenties?

Perhaps there is a touch of the later twenties. In the mid-twenties, after May Fourth and before the Northern Expedition, there was a process of differentiation among intellectuals, as some anarchists turned to the right and others to the left, some joined the KMT, others became organizers for the CCP. But there is a big difference. The debates of that time were much more directly political—not so theoretical—because there were powerful social movements, social and national, in the background: in 1923, and on a much bigger scale in 1925, and so on. The issue was no longer the meaning of modernity, or how to relate to tradition. These were new political languages. A closer parallel to today might be with the years just after the establishment of the KMT regime in Nanjing, when a lot of radical overseas students, who had become Marxists in Japan, came back to China and launched various literary movements and cultural watchwords, like the need for a ‘Revolutionary Literature’, even criticizing Lu Xun and Mao Dun as elitists. Then two years later, in 1930, there was a big debate about the nature of Chinese society, that Arif Dirlik has studied. You could compare that to the questions that confront us today, when people are trying to figure out what is going on in Chinese society now. Is it a socialist country with a capitalist market, or a capitalist country? What’s the nature of the state? What is the logic of globalization? What will happen to us? The different groups have to work out their own theoretical or political strategy.

One of the themes of your history of modern Chinese thought is the changing organization of knowledge—how it was structured or segmented in different periods. Comparing the period of your second volume with the situation today, what were the disciplines that have dominated the intellectual field?

In the late Qing period, sociology occupied the highest position in the hierarchy of knowledge. Its theorists generally refused to use the term

shehui (society), preferring qun (community or group) instead. But they were sure that sociology was the science of sciences—that is, it arranged the order of the different kinds of knowledge. The kind of order it produced served the state, but in a state-building rather than merely conserving sense: it was linked to various projects of social reform from above. When we move to the May Fourth movement, however, we see that the main figures wanted to discard any form of social science, and just base themselves on the natural sciences—which would yield a new map of the cosmos, within which social problems could be practically resolved, and whose mastery might offer a kind of moral grace. Individual thinkers could have more complicated positions—Lu Xun never subscribed to this scientism, Liang Qichao gave more importance to literature, and so on. But it is striking that for such a central figure as Hu Shih, even literature itself was modelled on scientific practice—he called a volume of his poems *A Collection of Experiments*. Later, this produced a vigorous debate between two schools, dubbed ‘Mr Science’ and ‘Mr Metaphysics’, or vitalist philosophy, out of which ethics, aesthetics and literature separated out as independent fields, re-mapping the whole taxonomy of knowledge. Overseas students who had been disciples of Irving Babbitt’s ‘new humanism’ in America played an important role in this shift. In each episode, you can see how the dominant ‘discipline’ in a given period is really more than that—its status is closer to a world view. It was just this function that Marxism came to fulfill in the later twenties, even for many natural scientists.

Today, of course, the dominant discipline in China is neo-classical economics. This is a development of the nineties. In the eighties, most of the leading economists like Wu Jinlian were still people who had been trained in the planned economy. They had learnt something from the West, but they were completely at home in the structure of the Communist state, and were quite capable in adapting and reforming it, once the Open Door policy was proclaimed. There were much more radical economists, figures like Li Yining, bent on importing pure free-market doctrines into China, but they were not yet of great use to the state, and had little influence. But after 1990, Hayekian ideas gained real ascendancy. Today economics—understood in its most rigidly liberal acceptation—has acquired the force of an ethics in China. Laissez

---

14 Liang Qichao (1873–1929): key theorist of late Qing reform era.
faire axioms form a code of conduct, as rules of the commodity which no agent may violate. So currently economics is not just a technical discipline, any more than its predecessors: it too is an imperative world view. Of course, no hegemony ever absorbs the whole cultural field. Political science or law are basically tributary to economics, as strongholds of the Right. By contrast, critical intellectuals today mostly work in the humanities, although there are also quite a few radicals in the natural sciences.

In the eighties, the West was viewed in a naively enthusiastic way by many Chinese intellectuals. Typical of that time was the television series River Elegy, a hymn to Zhao Ziyang’s policies, counterposing the disastrous inland traditions of Chinese autocracy to the dazzling azure of the open sea, symbol of foreign trade and Western freedom. This vision was widely shared at the time. In the nineties, the role of the West has not always appeared in such a flattering light, and Chinese opinion has itself become more diversified. The terms of discussion have also shifted, as ‘globalization’, has become the current watchword—in theory, a more encompassing category than simply the West. Entry into the WTO, as a practical priority for the CCP, has put the issue of relations between China as a nation-state and the institutions of the world market directly on the political agenda. How far have the pressures and probabilities of globalization been debated within the country, and what would be the main lines of division arising from it?

Issues of globalization were first raised at a conference around 1994, by a number of intellectuals who later described themselves as liberals. One argued that if China did not reform swiftly, it would fail to enter the main trend of globalization. Another spoke of the Enlightenment prospect of a perpetual peace coming true. At about the same time, Strategy and Management published a critical article on globalization by Samir Amin. So the debate about it really dates from that year. At the time, I argued globalization as such was a misleading abstraction, since the advent of high-tech information systems and other innovations cannot obscure the fact that it is not a new phenomenon but simply the latest phase of a long history, which could be defined as the whole process of the development of capitalism from the colonial and imperialist epochs onwards. In other words, globalization is not a neutral concept for a natural process. You have to identify the dominant force in its spread round the world.
These early discussions were not very conceptualized, and it was clear that, whatever the differences of opinion between them, feelings about the issue were quite ambivalent on both Right and Left. For there was a general sense that there would be many dangers and risks for China in accepting globalization, but how could we avoid it? Even critics of WTO entry like Cui Zhiyuan and Gan Yang don’t say, ‘China must never join the WTO’. Their position would be: ‘For the moment China should wait. There are a lot of changes we need first’. Most people on the Left believe that the government has been in too much of a hurry to enter the WTO—that a more measured approach would have been more sensible. Liberals on the Right, of course—economists like Zhou Qiren and Fan Gang in the entourage of Zhu Rongji—are eager to get the PRC into the WTO as soon as possible. This is a prime minister who has lost confidence in the ability of the government to resolve the problems of state-owned enterprises, and hopes that competition from foreign capital will take over as the driving force of economic reform. But at the same time, everyone is very aware that the reason why China could avoid the East Asian crisis of 1998 is because it was shielded from financial-market contagion by the strength of the national state. This is something even the enthusiasts for globalization are bound to recall.

The NATO bombing of China’s embassy in Belgrade forcibly brought home another reality. The world market, it made plain, is not just an economic space of competition: undergirding it is a powerful set of political and military structures. These make it very difficult to argue that the nation-state, whatever changes it may or may not have undergone, has collapsed. Behind the screens of NATO, the IMF or the WTO, American globalism functions as another version of nationalism. After the embassy was destroyed, there was an indirect debate between Zhu Xueqin, the Shanghai scholar who is perhaps China’s leading liberal spokesman today, and myself about the Balkan war and popular reaction to it. Zhu Xueqin maintained that nationalism was the most dangerous force in modern Chinese history. We should enter the world system at top speed, because globalism was much, much better than nationalism. I replied that it was an illusion to think they could be counterposed so simply. Nationalism as a historical force is not just a subjective sentiment that drew people into the streets, but also a set of social relations on which states essential for the operation of the world market themselves rest. That kind of nationalism is a parallel structure of global capitalism, not its opposite, and we should certainly criticize it.
At the same time, we need to be able to distinguish between different kinds of nationalism. While national states were passive or silent about NATO’s action in Yugoslavia, Chinese people poured into the streets and even threw a few bricks. That was positive. A spontaneous protest of this kind is a social movement that has a democratic potential. It can also be used by the government for official purposes, as the Boxers were—Zhu Xueqin was not wrong in warning of this danger. Any social movement contains different possibilities within it: our job is to analyse their range and support those that move in a democratic direction. For there is a logic here. This kind of nationalism is a movement of resistance against imperialism. But if we look at the intellectuals of the early part of the century, we see that when people like Zhang Taiyan or Lu Xun talked about nationalism, they paid attention to the other nations that imperialism had also oppressed: Greece, India, Poland, African countries. They tried to combine nationalism with cosmopolitanism. This tradition contained what I’ve called a self-negating, or self-transcending logic: embracing modernity as a national project generated a counter-logic that made them also critical of nationalism. They knew that even if they could transform China from an empire into a nation-state, nationalist goals could not be easily achieved within a national framework.

The same kind of dialectic is evident in the revolutionary tradition in China. After the late twenties, the Communist movement changed direction and increasingly set itself the goal of national liberation. Mao said that the national conflict with Japan had become the main social contradiction within China itself. But the revolution could not be compressed into just a nationalist project. Its self-negating logic drove it beyond that limit, to the early forms of internationalism you find in the Bandung Conference or Zhou En-Lai’s visit to Yugoslavia. At that stage the CCP tried to help bring Third World countries together in a common struggle for national independence and international equality. Those days are long past. But we should be thinking of these different legacies today, when we reflect on contemporary protests against globalization, in China or elsewhere. They do represent expressions of local protest against outside forces, but their democratic potential will only be truly realized if they can link up with similar protests in other countries, to become a factor for democracy on a global scale. In the world system, as capital moves across borders everywhere, social conflicts should in principle no longer be so easily confined within national structures. But we lack any conceptualization of such struggles, potential or actual.
Internationalism is an old-fashioned term, weighed down by too many connotations dating from the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. We need to rethink its meanings, or invent new ones, for our contemporary context.

*How did liberals—still the great majority of Chinese intellectuals—react to the Balkan War? Presumably the outburst of popular feeling was a discomfiting phenomenon for them, since it was directed against the very Western powers to which many looked with boundless admiration—it must have seemed like an attack on what is in some ways their ideal. But equally it must have been difficult for them to defend the NATO bombing?*

The war was a big crisis for them. Whereas we supported the popular movement against the bombing, they opposed it. Their dislike of the demonstrations was not based just on their sympathy—which in the circumstances could not be openly expressed—for the West, or their alarm at the way the government used them, but also on their long-term attitude to the Chinese masses. Most liberals view ordinary Chinese benevolently so long as they are helping to develop the market as consumers. For them the danger of popular nationalism is that the masses may become not only too critical of the West, but also too mobilized as citizens—veering away from the passive role of consumers to the more active one of militants. They are fearful of popular participation, always remembering its negative examples, and rarely seeing the positive potential of social movements as a condition of democracy. Since civil rights themselves are historically anchored within the structure of the nation-state, the typical narrative of Western liberalism directly connects nationalism and democracy. But Chinese liberals never face these connexions. They only believe in the Open Door and the global system. All China needs to do is to enter the ‘mainstream’—this is the term they use—and then everything will be okay. For them, integration into the world system is the only pass to democracy. This disbelief in the democratic potential of social movements is why more and more of the younger generation are turning away from them. If you log onto the internet now, you find a lot of criticisms of them. In that sense they have become quite isolated, even while they continue to represent the mainstream in intellectual circles—though even there, an increasing number of people have become less neutral, as between the Left and the Right. Fewer now define themselves simply as liberals.
Has the current Chinese government really made so much use of popular nationalist sentiment? From the outside, it often gives the impression of a regime obsessed by the power of America, but not pitted against it. If you look at what they do in the UN, or even in the wake of the bombing, they usually take care not to thwart the will of the US, but to comply unobtrusively with it. This doesn’t seem to be just bowing to superior force. Isn’t there also a deeper lack of confidence in the regime? Many of its highest officials appear convinced that the route America has taken is the way to go: they have no wish to resist it, since they privately think there’s no alternative. So although spontaneous nationalist protests might break out from time to time in China, the government would quickly put a stop to them, as it did in 1999?

It is true that the attitude of the Government to any social movement of this kind is to use it, as a modest lever in its constant bargaining with the West. Protests can be handy as a pressure on the Americans, even while they are compromising every minute with them. Telling the students to withdraw, they could say: ‘Yes, you are right to protest on this occasion. We have firmly condemned the bombing. But enough is enough. You will serve our country best by getting back to your studies, and helping our nation progress in your work. That will be better for our goals.’ This is another version of the logic of the nation: a critique of spontaneous nationalism for the purposes of state nationalism. Could there be the same kind of conflict over Taiwan? The Chinese government can scarcely avoid the issue, given the interventionist displays of American military power in the Strait. It has no choice in the matter, given national sentiment on the mainland. Ordinary people can be heard saying, ‘Why don’t we just go in and take the island?’ This isn’t a majority attitude, but it is something the government bears in mind. The potential is there for a sharp power struggle at the top over Taiwan. In the event of a factional conflict in the regime, we can be absolutely sure each side will try to use this issue against the other—already we can see signs of various forces waiting for the opportunity to attack their opponents. It is a general rule of contemporary Chinese history that social upheavals from below are triggered by struggles for power above, as rival leaders appeal openly—or secretly—for support from the masses. As the old Chinese saying puts it: ‘Fire at the castle gate means trouble for fish in the moat’.