Reimagining Li Zehou’s *A History of Chinese Classical Thought*

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When I reread Li Zehou’s *A History of Chinese Classical Thought* (published in Chinese in 1980), I am struck by three things:

1. How much more we know about early China now, in 2020, than we knew forty years ago, when this book was written;

2. Li Zehou’s distinctive (and still immensely useful) methodology for assessing the impact of culture on the sedimented histories of the individuals and of nation-states; and

3. Li Zehou’s abiding interest in such Marxist-inflected concepts as *rendao zhuyi* 人道主義 (conventionally translated as “humanism”), *ge de qi suo* 各得其所 (“to each, the proper place”), and *ping* 平 (“peace,” “balance,” “equanimity,” and “stable orders”).

Li, in the Afterword to this book, mentions that he doesn’t “write books that could have been written fifty years ago, or in fifty years’ time.” He is happy enough if he manages to prop up the forest for the health of the trees within it; he deplores wholesale destruction of the Chinese world he inhabits and loves best, threatened by its embrace of neoliberal presumptions and practices.

My initial reflections on this 1980 survey of Chinese thinking will therefore come in three parts, which hopefully will add up to more than their sum of their parts. Li Zehou’s writings deserve to elicit greater interest outside the China field. Carefully reading Li Zehou over the last decade or so has proven to be one of the more rewarding intellectual projects that I have taken on. And with political and economic crises arriving at our doors on a daily basis, certain of Li’s arguments are worth sustained analysis and consideration in today’s unstable environment. To these reflections on Li’s earlier writings, I will append my own musings on global threats to the survival of Li’s humanism.

**What Has Changed in Forty Years?**

My first observation inevitably concerns timing: the book that is translated (copyright 2020 by Lambert) is now some forty years out of date, in terms of its scholarship on early China. Those forty years have led historians, not to mention historically-minded sociologists and philosophers, to a host of new insights, spurred by the discovery of many scientifically excavated texts and artifacts, as well as the unprovenanced. These finds have prompted multiple salutary revisions to our accounts of the early empires, and, to a lesser extent, that of late imperial China.

Let me supply a handful of examples for those new to early China studies.

First, in EuroAmerica a growing consensus now holds that there were no clearly defined “schools” of thought in the pre-unification period, only rival thinkers who borrowed freely...
from one another as they sought to advise the courts of their day; explications in terms of “eclecticism” or “syncretism” are no longer the default positions adopted by historians or philosophers. Even forty years ago, Li was no respecter of labels; in one chapter he puts Han Feizi, Sunzi, and Laozi together (by the old views, a Legalist, a military expert, and a Daoist); in another, he dwells upon the connections between Zhuangzi to Chan Buddhism. Mencius and Xunzi are similar in Li’s telling, which is undoubtedly true but quite a startling observation in 1980; crucial to his story is Li’s deft displacement of the “too parochial” Kong-Meng-Cheng-Zhu or Kong-Meng-Lu-Wang lines beloved of the so-called New Neo-Confucians (311).

Li’s propensity to stir the pot when it comes to his chosen thinkers was far ahead of his time, certainly, for some of today’s intellectual historians still hesitate to push for what they continue to regard as unlikely pairings. (The prestigious Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, to take one example, continues to prefer the old commonplace of separate “schools” as “neater,” insistent as its editor is to find a counterpart, no matter how untenable, to the “more philosophical” Mediterranean constructs.) Li resorts to the language of eclecticism or syncretism only when trying to account for the changing fashions in elite intellectual life, changing fashions that he equally attributes to changes in socioeconomic and political structures.

Second, experts no longer reflexively read Wuxing/ Five Phases theory into passages describing the Five Materials (wu cai) or Five Planets. Li nonetheless thinks the “Five Phases” chapters of the Chunqiu fanlu ascribed to Dong Zhongshu (d. ca. 93 BC) the starting point for his discussion of Western Han (206 BC-AD 9) thought. Unfortunately for Li, the chief source he uses for Dong Zhongshu is a work that most experts today would date to a time more than three centuries after Dong.

Third, we have no evidence that early China was ever a “slave-owning” society, although Marxist historical schemas call it this. The centuries immediately preceding unification in 221 BC of most of the territory we today call “China” saw the rise in alienable landholdings liable to purchase and sale; the terms “slave society” or “feudalism” fits the Chinese case so poorly that outside the PRC you cannot find experts still struggling to apply such inappropriate ideological terms. (Marx made enough contributions to social theory without us cleaving to that!)

Fourth, a great deal of recent research has gone into specifying the precise institutions that fostered classical learning, approximating literacy rates, parsing fragments of library catalogues, and so on. Li Zehou’s history predates this body of research, and at key points his analyses would have benefitted from it, since Li is a voracious reader.

Sometimes it seems important to register such correctives and sometimes not. Let me give those new to the early China field one or two instances when they do, frankly speaking, matter a great deal. When speaking obliquely of the Han palace examinations for some entry-level offices, given the implications for the overblown claims to age-old “meritocracy” in China, it is important to state that so few people commanded the requisite high cultural

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1 I would push Li here, as these are not merely too parochial; they have no basis in fact, as Thomas Wilson’s *Genealogy of the Way* (Stanford University Press, 1995) showed plainly enough.
literacy for drafting memorials and edicts that 60-70% of bureaucratic postings had to be filled by the sons and nephews of the highly literate households whose male members already held high-ranking posts. It matters, too, that the two Han dynasties had ambitions to “civilize” local populations, which ambitions far outstripped those of the Roman empire at the same time.\(^2\) Hence the number of their officials (130,000 of them on the imperial payroll in Western Han, and probably ten times more on the staff of the imperial officials), also the propensity of those officials to think long and hard about which policy measures could reasonably pushed on the “uncivilized” locals and which not.

By way of contrast, Augustus had no paid administrators on his payroll whatsoever, though the later Roman empire would eventually see the need to acquire them. Such basic socioeconomic facts help to explain many aspects of thinking in early and middle-period China; absent their provision, the unwary reader may consider certain conditions the products of either individual or group “choice” or even “cost-benefit analysis,” rather than longstanding policies favoring “nudges” of the sort detailed by Richard H. Thaler. Instead, informed readers should be thinking of the peculiarities of manuscript culture, in the centuries before print culture made good use of good paper, relatively inexpensive printing techniques, and the “blind” civil service examinations.

Then, too, it often dramatically alters our views of the distant past if we alter our notions when certain currents of thought began to command greater attention in elite circles. To cite one example, Li does not give a serious look at Yang Xiong (d. AD 18), the foremost classical master in Western Han and Xin dynasties. In this, Li’s history is similar to other histories of philosophy written forty years ago. (The reasons for omitting Yang from the roster of revered classical masters goes back to Song times, but they are too complicated to detail here.)

What matters is this: in one of his three masterworks, Exemplary Figures (Fayan), Yang admitted to drawing as heavily from the Zhuangzi as from the writings ascribed to Confucius (the Analects and the Annals or Chunqiu classic), and in a second masterwork, the Canon of Supreme Mystery (Taixuan), Yang devised a systematic cosmology that skillfully incorporated the latest scientific advances of his time. Therefore the origins of Mystery Learning (xuanxue) by rights should be traced back to Yang, and to the Eastern Han private academy of Jingzhou whose curriculum focused on Yang’s writings. Well before the Wei-Jin period, in other words, Yang’s influence made itself felt and a straight line of transmission can be drawn from Wang Can to Wang Bi, who inherited Can’s fabulous library. Looking back at the two Han dynasties with this in mind, it was indisputably Yang, not Dong Zhongshu, who made the most impressive contributions to historiography and to cosmology, although Dong Zhongshu was a highly respected legal consultant for the court. Philosophers tend to ignore such specifics, enamored as they are with universal truths, but Li Zehou is one of a handful of first-rate philosophers to have taken what might be called a “diagnostic turn” intent upon exploring precise cases in history (e.g. Raymond Geuss, in Cambridge; Herbert Fingarette, Hans Sluga, and Kwong-loi Shun in Berkeley, Tan Sor-hoon, 2 The two empires of Han and Rome were roughly the same size in territory, and they had roughly the same number of inhabitants, some 60 million.)
in Singapore; Eric Hutton in Utah). Others may claim to be arguing from history; few do in actuality. Su Li, the legal scholar, is a case in point, for Su’s main arguments rest upon false claims to historicity. (I do not imagine that Su Li is dishonest, just that he thinks he knows Chinese history better than he does; a recent translation of Su Li’s writings and responses to it shows the group of thinkers still circling around outdated concepts, despite claims to represent “a historical point of view.”) That means, the more nimble Li would doubtless have benefitted hugely from the later developments in the field of early China, unlike many senior theorists in China who do not trouble to keep up with the latest developments. At the same time, the central insights in Li Zehou’s general history of Chinese philosophy do not suffer substantially. Indeed, looking backwards from today’s vantage point allows us to appreciate how fresh and exciting Li’s views have been, propelling young intellectuals in China to undertake the serious study of pre-imperial and imperial history, in the very decades when the Communist Party has been determinedly looking to the future.

So what makes Li Zehou’s work a compelling read, even forty years after publication, in a good, if rather bloodless translation? Clearly, it is Li’s ability to strike at the heart of vital matters that have often eluded the less erudite, the less passionate, and the less agile. At numerous points, I would probably push Li further than he was prepared to go forty years ago. For example, Xunzi and Zhuangzi constitute a natural pairing, as both begin with a strikingly similar picture of the human condition, and the Zhuangzi, pace the common wisdom, never prefers escapism and eremitism to frank talk about the irresistible demands of “Being in the World of Men” (the title of Chapter 4).

But Li’s history offers plenty of intriguing contrasts and comparisons already. For instance, Li couples the sophisticated Xunzi, which dismisses the claims of the Changes classic to be the work of sage-kings, with Han commentaries to the Changes divination classic (Yizhuan). Such a link is bound to take informed readers aback initially, but Li’s chapter is fundamentally correct, I believe. For Xunzi doesn’t have to believe in divination as communication-with-the-unseen to deploy divination as ritual communication-with-the-living. Moreover, the Xunzi is as preoccupied as the Changes’ Ten Wings with the operations of time, chance, and timely opportunity. And Li is undoubtedly right when he insists upon the signal lack of metaphysical yearnings in pre-Buddhist Chinese thinking.

In the pre-Buddhist eras, people conceived the world as composed entirely of qi, configured or self-organizing energies, replete with their own moral potentials. As Heaven, like the ancestors and gods who reside in heaven, are no more than collocations of refined qi, they do not constitute another type of being. (Marshall Sahlin’s The Western Illusion of Human Nature and Bruno Latour’s We Have Never been Modern remind us how different “the West” has been in this.) And unlike many cultural conservatives, such as Yü Ying-shih, Li does not particularly celebrate the educated Chinese male. Li may celebrate classical culture, which he thinks uniquely alive to pleasure (“sensitive to delight” in Lambert’s rendering, and

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3 Su Li, The Constitution of Ancient China, edited by Zhang Yongde and Daniel A. Bell, translated by Edmund Ryden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). One doesn’t have to be interested in Confucianism’s “self-promotion,” as “Su Li’s Responses to Commentators” protests, to discern that Su Li’s hard dichotomy between “abstract culture” and “concrete problems,” not to mention his last resort to “cost-benefit analysis,” represents a crude apology for China’s neoliberalism “with Chinese characteristics,” nor to see how flawed Su Li’s understanding of history is. Indeed, Su seems to be is a presentist through and through.
“optimistic” in others translations), but on the whole he is blessedly gender-blind (which Yú emphatically is not).

**Li’s Distinctive Method**

The historian in me surveys the academic fads of the last forty years in her field, including the overblown and rather dubious celebrations of cultural memory and cultural representation. Come and gone is the craze for the digital humanities (merrily imploding, due to its own lackluster achievements, given its huge expense). This survey reminds me that nobody has come up with a markedly better model than Li Zehou’s “sedimentation” theory by which to explain the sort of “path dependence” that historians believe they see in every era.

Culture is a notoriously difficult word to define, as Raymond William’s *Keywords* reminds us, but we cannot deny that it somehow shapes realities past, present, and future, through highbrow journals, media outlets, and pop culture, in what Li dubs a “cultural-psychological formation” (310). So while Li could never be lumped with the New Institutionalism that has taken over studies of antiquity (with the inevitable pushback by those who exult in Athenian and Roman glory), he shares their approaches to some degree.4

For the purposes of unpacking Li’s distinctive method, then, I will draw upon and revise formulations I first came to ponder in response to a lecture by my Berkeley colleague, Emily Mackil, on the competing disciplinary models for conceiving past and present:

1. Sociological institutionalism rejects the totalizing assumption that organizations and institutions are the product of rational and purposive attempts to introduce greater efficiency into social life, and alleges that institutions are the products not of rational design processes aimed at promoting efficiency but rather of the *assimilation of cultural practices into organizations*. Sociologists tend to ask why specific institutions are adopted and how they are diffused through industries, professions, regions, and states through formal and informal phenomena (the latter including moral values and symbol systems). Their goal is to discern the connections between the individual, individual actions, and society as mutually constitutive and dynamic. Insofar as institutions are the products of cultural preferences, as cognitive and affective systems, they become, in theory, proper subjects of study.

2. By contrast, the rational choice theories that heavily color political science, economics, and legal studies assert that strategic and calculating behavior affects all people’s ability to undertake joint action. By this world-

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4 As my colleague Randolph Starn once said, some historians have to “script the action and raise and lower the footlights by periods,” and I see this in colleagues who know little to none of Chinese history aside from the stereotypes. Writing on glory, I prefer the work of Timothy Chappell and Douglas Cairns to the American celebrants of Athenian democracy.
view predicted on the “autonomous, rational being,” institutions are created to reduce inefficiencies or transaction costs that people would prefer to avoid, but once created, institutions represent mainly constraints on human interaction. Meanwhile, significantly for rational choice theorists, institutions tend to be seen as the result, initially at least, of careful strategic calculations about how to achieve the most gains from ad hoc and permanent forms of cooperation.

(3) Historical institutionalism tends to define institutions in terms of the formal and informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy. In consequence, cultural institutions matter to historians a great deal. Historians routinely admit the possibility, indeed the probability, that institutions may be shaped and maintained by forces other than a drive for economic efficiency and economic gain.

Indeed. Historians like myself are apt to find people complex beings whose “reasoning” need hardly be “rational.” After all, so much of life is governed by processes outside of free will, if one pays attention to the philosophers and neuroscientists. Gilbert Ryle, for instance, argues that “When we observe a person’s acts, we observe his intentions and desires, so the latter are not causes, but characteristics”; Elizabeth Anscombe, that mental states (desires, intentions, etc.) are not associated with actions via empirical laws, and so they cannot be said to cause actions; and Herbert Fingarette, that “Much, if not most of our actions are inadvertent, involuntary, thoughtless, by habit or rote, or otherwise unintentional.” For that reason, historians emphasize “path dependence,” meaning, once certain choices are made and implemented, they and their effects can rarely be undone, without monumental effort.

To historians like myself, then, the so-called “significant” historical event becomes no more than a node in time, to which numerous historians down through history have drawn their attention, crediting the event with shaping the basic contours of social life, rather than little more than a pile-up of catastrophes whose accumulation may have elicited strikingly little thought as they occurred. Certainly, the wide impact of Huang’s 1587: a year of no significance and Gumbrecht’s In 1926: living at the edge of time alerts us to the pitfalls of portraying history as a string of “significant events” rather than broader trends, the “piles of wreckage.”

I say to my undergraduates that names, dates, and events are like the numbers 1-9. The ability to wield those numbers doesn’t make you a good mathematician, nor does the ability to trot out names, dates, and events make you a professional historian of repute. That said, the farther people travel down a particular path, the harder it becomes to turn around. Ergo, the word “path” as a “self-reinforcing process” eerily akin to carved neural pathways. Kahneman’s Thinking Fast and Slow may be adduced in evidence here. The institutional historian emphasizes what we might call the stickiness of institutions, i.e., their persistence over time and their distribution, even if no one would credit institutions with rationality.

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5 Of course, I refer here to Walter Benjamin’s poetic “counter-staging of history” against history as “step-by-step progress,” inspired by Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus.” I thank Randy Starn for this citation.

6 For the foregoing paragraphs with their frequent asides, Professor Mackil, it need hardly be said, is not responsible, though I thank her for clarifying the disciplinary boundaries for me.
By such categories, Li’s method undeniably makes him an institutional historian, and a good one at that, insofar as he:

(1) Attempts to bridge micro and macro social action and processes;

(2) Traces how formal institutions develop gradually from practices observed and agreements made; and

(3) Identifies critical turns in history through diachronic analysis.

Li thinks the “challenge is to explain how” an “ism” becomes the “heart and soul” of a culture (313), and more particularly, in the case of China, how clan-based society gradually yielded to class-based society, ushering in periods of boom and bust that required the powerful to constantly scramble to rethink the premises of good governance. Metculous investigations and pragmatic orientations are the hallmark of Chinese culture, Li says, in stark contrast to Russian mysticism, so the hope is that Chinese reasoning may “reestablish itself at a higher level” (317), freeing itself from Soviet-style ways of modes of operating.

In addition, Li writes, “I have always argued that studies in Chinese history .... should, as far as possible, undertake detailed and specialized research. Only when many specific histories have been fully researched can more accurate and scientific general histories be produced” (308). He apologizes in his last chapter for presenting a general history at all: “I dare not claim that this present essay is a work in the history of philosophy, but a history of philosophy ought to reflect the historical progress of self-consciousness.” Agreed, even if we quibble over the connotations of the word “progress.”

Foregrounded in Li’s History of Chinese Classic Thought is Li’s theory of sedimentation, which seeks to explain the uniqueness of the human species in particular times and places (mainly on the North China Plain) largely in terms of the evolution of the local sub-species due to its ever-increasing resort to an ever-wider range of tools: physical, cognitive, emotional, and institutional, and most especially cultural. For Li, people are distinct from animals by virtue of their acute awareness of time and timing, which allows them to imagine their own deaths. No less importantly in Li’s history of evolution, reading, writing, music, and knowledge

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8 Here I myself part company, respectfully with Li, as I believe, with Paul Veyne, that the modern historian’s main task is not to seek explanations masquerading as causes, but to restore a plausible silhouette to a discrete time and place, taking into account all the evidence at our disposal.
9 I cannot read Li Zehou without thinking of William Skinner’s work.
10 In this connection, Li offers a misreading of Joseph Levenson’s Confucian China and its Modern Fate (ACLS History E-Book Project, 2008), the only work of history at the time to ask, At what cost have modern Chinese relegated their traditions to a museum, the “dust-bin of history”?
11 Li himself portrays Confucian political thought as backward-looking (312), to the golden age of the Three Dynasties (312), acknowledging the difference between such theories and future-oriented utopian thought of Kang Youwei or a Mao.
production all intervene as noteworthy technologies, prompting powerful elites to incessantly formulate and reformulate distinctive notions of the “common good,” as first known from the Warring States masterworks and Five Classics, with their rich commentarial traditions.¹²

In China, as elsewhere, a series of particular improvisational moves, delicate turns of the manifold in Nathan Sivin’s memorable phrase, eventually throw off discreet historical cultures grounded in aesthetic appreciations of the cosmos and an allied set of predispositions to view the world—with humans posited as an integral part of that world, in no way superior to it—as inherently good and moral, bending toward justice, if you will. Nothing could offer a greater contrast with most Abrahamic views of human nature as inherently sinful, and societies and states construed as “unfree” and “controlling,” nor, for that matter, with the cultural conservatives’ fond fictions of an “unchanging China,” the “longest continuous civilization.”

Obviously enough, the very sedimented processes from which human culture is constructed can, under certain circumstances, burden the human imagination and impede human advances. (This was the claim of the powerfully affecting “River Elegy,” which blamed “the weight of tradition” for all China’s perceived ills in the past two centuries.) Cultural inclinations are fragile, and cultural memories all the more so. If constructive social behavior (by Li’s definition) is to be encouraged, both must rely heavily upon a cluster of sustaining institutions for support: the family, instruction of all types (not just vocational), and state-sponsored welfare institutions, to mention but a few.

Enter, stage right, Jiwei Ci’s dystopian sketches of a post-Tiananmen China, wherein people’s aspirations have been thwarted by concerted forces internal and external, with the result that its citizenry, in the absence of real freedoms, turns to a nihilism (defined as widespread cynicism about institutions) fed by hedonistic immersions in rampant consumerism.¹³ Evidently, short-term delights become the drug of choice to people long denied a satisfying sense of human connections. Who needs a Christian revival or mantic experts in the marketplace, for that matter, promising deferred gratifications? Jiwei Ci’s rhetoric, historically grounded as it is,¹⁴ can nonetheless be countered and enriched by Li’s history, insofar as Li rather quietly but insistently asks, What is human progress, after all?

For Li, whom many would hail as one of the chief intellectual inspirations for Tiananmen, the answer is understandably complex, but the touchstones are these: any “good” society, to work for its members, must afford them opportunities to develop their own capacities in ways that conduct to a larger human good. Taking the long view, Li chooses to believe that the resources available to the Chinese people (and to curious non-Chinese who avail themselves of their own distinctive cultural resources, as well as interactions with other

¹² For Li, knowledge and culture are forms of production that produce distinctive forms of life. Knowledge is “reflexively tied to the social conditions of its production,” as Li Zehou realizes.

¹³ That said, consumerism took a very long time to become the third pillar of the Chinese economy, with agriculture and industry. A tremendous change in Chinese habits, consumerism even today occupies far less of overall GDP than in the USA.

¹⁴ My one objection to Gi’s latest book, Democracy in China (Harvard University Press, 2019), is not how badly it misconstrues Chinese history but how badly it understands American culture, including de Tocqueville.
cultures) suffice to build a better future wherein each and every person can not only become but also operate as a thinking and feeling person of worth, in the company of such others.

Li’s favorite Chinese classics might seem to allow cautious optimism, for both Laozi’s *Dao de jing* and the *Analects* ascribed to Confucius evince a strong interest in teaching people to “know what is enough” (*zhi zu* 知足) and a firm faith in the human capacity to derive solutions that are simultaneously moral and pragmatic for the host of ills that beset humanity in any age. Even abiding by the touchstone “knowing what is enough” could conceivably forestall, if not prevent global environmental disasters, for who among us needs that many pairs of shoes and that many flights to attend conferences. And Chinese culture over the centuries has offered other guidelines:

1. *Wu wei* 無為 (“non-intrusive activity”) necessitating wide consultation and massive delegation of authority by the court; ergo, the possibility that the Scotsman Reginald F. Johnston could proclaim China the freest country in the world, in its strong reliance on self-organizing units; and

2. “Leave no traces” (*wu ji* 無迹/*xiao ji* 削跡/迹) operates as the functional equivalent of *wuwei* in everyday life; and

3. The powerful idea of “One world” as variant upon “One Dao,” with the goal of “complete integration” (*cheng* 誠, *quan zhen* 全真), with the implication that, for better or worse, we’re all in this together.15 (For those who don’t know it, reading Kang Yuwei’s posthumous *One World Philosophy* in English translation will astonish and confound.)

**Li Zehou’s Grounding in Marx**

One of the best things about reading this particular masterwork of Li Zehou—several of his writings have secured that status17—is Li’s steadfast refusal to ignore the material basis for realities in the remote past. Li’s history may be the perfect antidote to toxic comments by those who disdain “the reality-based” crowd in East Asia and in EuroAmerica. While many anti-Communists prefer to ignore Li’s trenchant reflections on Marxism, if we are to understand Li, we would do better not to avert our gaze. (To ignore Marx in Li’s theory would be akin to reading Adorno without Marx.) After all, the young Marx is invariably interested in the human scale and human motivations, like Li Zehou. For that reason, presumably, Li writes, “Only when this issue [the relation of humans to nature] is

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15 The philosophers often mistranslate *cheng* as “sincerity,” not knowing the Han exegetes gloss it as *quan*, being whole and intact.
16 I disagree with but ponder Li’s statement: “We might say that Han Confucians’ idea of unity of *tian* (Heaven, the heavens) and humans established a cosmological model within which human behavior was free” (329). Certainly, the Han Confucians placed far more emphasis on human parity than on human hierarchies than did the Song Confucians.
17 My own favorite remains *Lunyu jindu*, a marvel of erudition and judiciousness.
approached from within the Marxist idea of humanized nature can there be an adequate answer” to the conundrum.

Beauty and aesthetic appreciation must be introduced to all forms of life, rather than being confined to the “inner realm of mental quietude,” as Li puts it. His call is to rehumanize the world, to reintroduce the notion favored by experts in the ecology: that human habitats and human beings are co-dependent and one. (My sense is that Li prefers the early Marx to the later, just at he is more interested in early Adam Smith on moral sympathies than on the theory incorrectly attributed to Smith on the market’s “the invisible hand.”)

Li is a wide reader in multiple traditions, and few are so deeply steeped in the human sciences. For that reason, Li ably directs our attention to issues of social justice in a way that puts John Rawls to shame as a relative naif, to take one example. An accomplished aesthete if ever there was one, Li Zehou nevertheless continually confronts us with the counter-question, Is the cost of civilization acceptable (186) and do people have any choice in the matter anyway? In defiance of the norms we inhabit, Li is comfortable coupling the phrases “brutal new regime” with “rapidly developing material civilization,” in ways that few aside from leftist economists do. In other words, like He bucks the trend to adduce rapid GDP growth as justification for a majority of citizens living in dire poverty. On those grounds, Li Zehou’s work recalls the more recent work by David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins entitled On Kings, which delves into the perennial brutality of the political processes that impose concordia, “to ask how we might, for once, refuse to play.”

Li admits that authenticity and freedom, no less than culture itself, are ill-defined concepts, but he deems them nonetheless to be of supreme value, and indeed post-modern liberal humanism stumbles whenever it ignores the human duty to weigh its priorities in light of human values. If this new translation of an earlier classic takes just a few readers back to the Zhuangzi, which insistently asks us to consider what is life’s meaning, and how can one survive, even flourish in a chaotic age (188), then the effort will have been worth it, to my mind. There is a unique vision here, one that embraces the dual necessity of acknowledging one’s own desires and those of others, also one that credits intuitions drawn from daily life as much or more than logic-chopping, and eschews the pernicious fiction of the “individual, autonomous rational being” (222).

Li’s chapter devoted to the Art of War ascribed to Sun Wu, a sixth-century BC general, is the smartest piece I have read in a long time, for, as Li shows, the Art of War, superficially just another Machiavellian conceit advocating deceit and deception, is, upon closer reading, a far more demanding argument for trust. Another chapter pairing the Zhuangzi and Chan Buddhism also surprises. There Li makes a very good case that the category of Daoism is incoherent, since the Inner Chapters of the Zhuangzi and the Laozi have little in common

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18 It is germane that Li grew up under the regime of pre-fab housing and national construction. Mao explicitly said there’s no time nor place for beauty in state-sponsored processes.

19 https://www.economist.com/briefing/2019/11/28/economists-are-rethinking-the-numbers-on-inequality promises a thorough review of left economists, but it ends up criticizing their data, telling us that inequality is not so bad after all.


21 See Li on the “false self” and “what is not me” (194).
(183, 187), whereas the Zhuangzi shares with Chan Buddhism an “ontology centered on the pursuit of the ideal character and realm of human existence” (184). (Historians of religion and philosophers take note)\(^2\)

Was Zhuangzi the first text to theorize alienation? Possibly. Surely, the Zhuangzi is one of the first texts (productions by the Stoics and Epicureans come to mind) to articulate the dangers of enslavement to things and powerful people. Does the Zhuangzi actually advocate a return to primitive society? I don’t see it myself, but Li’s rumination on the romantic calls to return to primitivism in and the course of historical evolution fascinate nonetheless (186). And, as Li notes, such lines as “The man who steals a buckle is put to death, while the man who steals a kingdom becomes a prince” “provoke profound reflection” today (ibid.). Above all, Li Zehou battles complacency, hatred, and lack of curiosity wherever those demons rear their ugly heads; he does so with grace and humor. These battles are important, especially in the Chinese and American contexts, perhaps. And Li, unlike many, generously acknowledges those who have conveyed important insights before him (see, e.g., 191n35, 228, 243).

Historians, sociologists, and my favorite philosophers share certain preoccupations, among them, What is the relation of the individual to the group and to the larger society? How can order and purpose be brought together, even momentarily, via the embrace of life’s constraints and pleasures (compare 194)? Is it ever enough for a human being to derive delight or joy or pleasure from “common causes and shared norms” (270), as these may lead to in-group oppression of an out-group? And finally, what, if any, are the advantages and disadvantages of a “regime of truth” (Foucault’s useful term) in antiquity and in today’s world? Academics should acknowledge the threat posed by those who would say that some lies, are acceptable because they are useful lies, so long as they serve identity constructions.\(^2\)

I do not know Li Zehou well, though I have read his work, critiqued that work, and met the man. But, to do him justice, I need to ask what issues would he, a profound humanist, be addressing, in all likelihood, were he to rewrite his history of classical thought today, forty years on? Recall that Li is widely regarded as one of the chief inspirations for those who gathered at Tiananmen Square to ask for greater democracy. Today’s world is vastly different from the world of 1989 in some respects, when Gorbachev recently had overseen the dismantling of the Soviet Union and people like Francis Fukuyama were so foolish as to think we were about to live in a world defined by the “end of history.”

Today “populist” authoritarianisms (with their harshness towards ethnic, religious, and ideological Others) in new and stronger alliances, East and West, have joined forces with predatory capitalism to dismantle the remnants of the old Cold War Fordist capitalism. We could begin with the array of companies, EuroAmerican and Japanese, that hail the “favorable business climate” in Xinjiang, using forced and indigent labor. But should the rest of us point fingers? How many still kid themselves that it’s fine to use Facebook, despite


\(^{23}\) I am appalled by this line of thinking, which goes back to the culture wars at the NEH (and long before); on identity issues, I presume.
everything we know about Facebook’s misogynist origins and invitations to hacking, on the excuse that it’s more convenient than uploading multiple jpgs to their emails?

Marxism lacks any strong ethical teachings, because Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels assumed that workers freed from the burdens of making their livings under oppressive circumstances would adopt benign “internationalist” towards their counterparts. How wrong they were. Historians know that the comfortable captains of industry have long had their ill-paid workers join forces to exclude others by every anti-democratic means at their disposal, including voter suppression. Acknowledging that capitalism has brought us to today’s ruthless competition and naked fears, to counter that ethical void, and to account for factors beyond the economic mode of production, Li has sketched for us a complex picture of an evolving Chinese culture that holds out the potential for ethical behavior in the face of dreaded competition. Indeed, any culture may do, as it is a balance of forces that is required, if humanity is to survive its worst impulses to know nothing.

Why use this opportunity to foreground Li Zehou’s commitment to Marxism, when I am no Marxist? Li himself has identified Marxism as one of the three major influences on his thinking (the other two being what he identifies as Confucian classicism, and Western science and democracy). I hope, then, to remedy a flaw in most treatments of Li’s writings that underplay or ignore that commitment for two related reasons:

(1) They don’t consider Marxism to be a good concept “to think with”; and

(2) A surprising number of people in academia today have not read much Marx, only the critiques of Marxism or a few catchphrases that they impu to Marx (in my limited experience, often incorrectly).

So what does Li derive from Marx? He doesn’t precisely tell us, but, as Lukács noted in 1971, “Orthodoxy in regard to Marxism refers exclusively to method.”

I would like to sketch Li’s method here, which consists of a type of phenomenological dialectical reasoning, a method probing the grounds or presuppositions of our knowledge of social life. Such a dialectical phenomenology has three distinguishing features:

(1) Its treatment of subjects and objects as unified/united;

(2) Its treatment of this unity of subject and object as purposive activities or “forms of life,” to adopt Wittgenstein’s memorable turn of phrase; and

(3) Its treatment of subjects and objects as grounded in their forms of life.

By contrast, positivism conceives of the subject not as a social subject in membership in a community but as a private subject whose purposes and attitudes originate internally. And only positivists can talk of objectivity (“Let the facts speak for themselves,” as if they could talk.). Li has absorbed these ideas in his work. So, unlike many sociologists who believe in

24 Compare Roslyn Wallach Bologh’s discussion of Marx’s Grundrisse (in Dialectical Phenomenology: Marx’s Method Routledge, 2009) from which I have taken the definition.
objective conditions of existence that are “things in themselves,” Li, in my reading at least, casts all modes of production (including the peculiar forms of theorizing associated with high cultural learning) as embedded and implicated in and inseparable from social conditions.

For the foregoing reasons, reading Li Zehou makes for much more bracing reading than, say, reading through Adam Gopnik. Adam Gopnik calls “coincidental” every suffering inflicted by early or late-stage capitalism on societies (including the 2008 economic meltdown and Trumpism), precisely because of his refusal or inability to credit Marxism with any substantial contribution to world culture. Marxism is, in Gopnik’s view, the source of such soul-destroying regimes as Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism (which argument is just about as subtle and sophisticated as tracing a straight line to the Crusades from the Sermon on the Mount).\(^{25}\) But if freedom and human dignity are a person’s ultimate goals, as Gopnik claims, to airily dismiss Marxian analyses, even or even especially when he went wrong, is to rest content with having no credible plan for the future—no sanities, if you will, only inanities.

Global warming, AGI, water rights—just to name three looming world crises—will require better insights than Rockefeller Republicanism has on offer. Read Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens’s Democracy in America, or Barbara Ehrenreich’s Nice and Dimed, or David Graeber’s The Utopia of Rules, and you begin to get the picture at the profound rot at the heart of today’s forms of life. Give me Ross Douthat any day over the “feel-good” thinkers, although I am an ardent ex-Catholic. At least, Douthat can think, he offers advice (some of it very good advice), and he keeps his eyes on his prize (right now, a Trump-free future). Arguments need to be not only ethically correct but structurally acute, in an era of institutional erosion across America plagued more surely by devil-may-care stock markets and corrupt and corrupting media empires than by the dreaded coronavirus.

On the analytical level, Li is certainly right to locate in Chinese classical thought unusual spurts of clarity. Here is one Chinese thinker, Sima Qian, writing in 100 BC:

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\begin{align*}
\text{As for the ordinary lot of tax-paying commoners, if they are confronted by}\hfill & \\
\text{someone whose wealth is 10x their own, they behave with humility; if by}\hfill & \\
\text{someone whose wealth is a 100x their own, they cringe with fear; if by}\hfill & \\
\text{someone whose wealth is a 1,000x their own, they will undertake to work for}\hfill & \\
\text{him; and if by someone whose wealth is 10,000x their own, they become his}\hfill & \\
\text{slave. This is the principle of things.}
\end{align*}
\]

In this passage (and many others) Chinese thinkers wrestled with the paradox of living in a society made up of individuals whose relationships and hierarchies are nevertheless predicated on and sustained by the circulation of impersonal goods.\(^{26}\) In this passage, Sima Qian implicitly asks readers to consider whether people can and should be content to be enslaved.

\(^{25}\) See Gopnik, A Thousand Small Sanities, 152ff.

\(^{26}\) Fast forward, and we live in a world where personal trust, the kind built up by face-to-face encounters, has been largely replaced by demands for impersonal trust (the ATM, the phone banks offshore, and robocalls).
Relatedly, Han Yuhai, a Beijing New Left historian, has observed that, for all too many in today’s China or the US, the much vaunted “freedom” promised by the neo-liberal market economy boils down to little more than the “freedom to want to be a slave.” What kind of cultural formations can push back against the ultimate commodification of the human being (and hence de-humanization) that we find on every level of interaction in today’s world?

Ci Jiwei’s analysis perhaps offers a latter-day assist in this connection, since Ci confirms that Communism under Deng and Xi Jinping has offered anything but freedom to the Chinese people of the People’s Republic. It has offered crony capitalism on the same order as Putin’s Russia on view in the movie Citizen K, supplemented with media whitewash and trashtalk, to encourage the same type of Group-think, We vs. They, that the Trump White House purveys (though Xi and his circle is undeniable smarter, as they take the longer view, untroubled by the specter of elections). Nihilism and true belief (the frantic embrace of a black-and-white world to stave off nihilism) have come to the fore, aided in this by many forces that lay waste to individual and community lives. Evidently, no matter what cultural formations a society once proudly embraced, they are fragile formations, liable to disruption and wild deformations. Simple decency, one might say, has been deftly outmaneuvered.

**Conclusion: What Now and Wither Humanism, East or West?**

Now that we can plainly see, if we choose, the effects of unregulated “zombie” capitalism, we may properly ask whether Li’s prescriptions for China and indeed for humanity have any chance to be realized in China, where he is widely read, or elsewhere, given the interlocking cultural-psychological deformations of the post-Cold War era? The past two years in Hong Kong give one pause.

Rereading Li Zehou, in Chinese or in English returns me to a better world where ideas still seem transformative. Yet reading the newspaper each morning, I confront abundant evidence that ideas and culture may well not matter very much in future, except when culture is weaponized in defense of the status quo. For governments around the world are now availing themselves of powerful surveillance techniques that preclude freedom of action. “China’s cyberspace is purposefully designed to be an essential component of the overall political control structure ... This ... has the potential to put China on a path towards an entirely new, potentially totalitarian future, while also providing precedents and tools to other authoritarian regimes” in the Belt and Road states.” “We should therefore (if no softening of policies occurs) prepare ourselves for a less welcome, and potentially nasty, evolution of the Chinese political system.”

Just to list a few of the data collection activities and protocols routinely foisted on individuals:

- DNA (including of members of family)
- Biometric data in general, such as retina signatures
- Fingerprints and palm textures

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27 *Economist*, on liberal (Dec. 5?) stakeholder vs. shareholder capitalism.

• Voice patterns
• Gestures, gait and postures
• Habit and behavioral pattern recording
• Mobility pattern tracking
• Social networking signals
• Consumption metric
• Facial recognition for humans and animals
• QR codes at the household door (already in place in parts of Xinjiang),
  which allows for the potential for patrol robots to scan, interpret and, if
  necessary, report and respond. The potential for robots to engage in actual
  intervention is in development, in China as elsewhere.

The idea underlying all these new forms of knowledge production has been succinctly
articulated by Putin: “Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere [of AI] will become the
ruler of the world.” Xi Jinping’s regime relies heavily on the concept of military-civil fusion
(MCF), a national strategy since 2013, that blurs the lines between civilian and
military/defense science and technology resources. The US cannot be far behind, as
domestic authoritarianism to defend against authoritarianism abroad can always find
Congressional supporters.

Foucault spoke of the production of the “docile body” in his 1975 classic, *Surveiller et
Punir: Naissance de la Prison.* Docile bodies have indeed been fashioned with the utmost care
over time, as these are the very bodies that function most efficiently in factories, in orderly
military regiments, and in school classrooms. To construct docile bodies the disciplinary
institutions must be able to (a) constantly observe and record the bodies they control; and
(b) ensure the internalization of the disciplinary individuality within the bodies being
controlled. Given the “unequal gaze” that Foucault spoke of, where the watched cannot
observe the watcher, can Li’s quiet insistence on human equality, dignity, and freedom ever
hope to convert adherents? And if China manages to become the next super-power, can the
marvels of Chinese culture that Li delineates in his history of classical thought survive assault
by the powerful? Stay tuned.

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29 Compare Barbara Ehrenreich’s 2009 *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America* (Metropolitan
Books) and the 2009 movie “Up in the Air.”