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INTRODUCTION

The Ancient Greeks in Modern China

All under heaven there is no place but the King's land; and
within the borders of all the land, there is nobody but the
King's subject.

—BEISHAN, *THE SHI-JING*¹

I. Why the Ancient Greeks?

There are, of course, no ancient Greeks in modern China—nor anywhere else these days. But the ancient Greeks live on in China through their works. Over the past century, the philosophical and political texts of western antiquity, especially those of classical Athens, have sparked the interest of Chinese intellectuals, journalists, reformers, and nationalists. Given that China was closed to the West for most of the Ming and Qing dynasties, this interest is barely a hundred and fifty years old. It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that Chinese reformers and intellectuals started to turn to western texts on political theory and philosophy to help them reimagine

future possibilities for a Chinese nation. And, as this book illustrates, they found it appropriate to turn, not only to modern texts, but also to works from western antiquity—works by figures such as Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, and, to a lesser extent, the Romans Cicero and Vergil. These age-old thinkers took their place among Kant, Rawls, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and others.²

The Chinese turn to western texts for social and political guidance and inspiration first occurred during the years of crisis and revolution leading up to and following the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911. More recently, there has been a second wave, one that coincides with the surge in Chinese confidence and nationalism.³ But these two “turns” could not be more different. In the last decades of the Qing dynasty and the early days of the short-lived new republic, the classics of western antiquity were considered relevant to the scientific and political development of China out of a system much like serfdom. Articles by prominent intellectuals such as Liang Qichao helped to disseminate the political ideas of Greek antiquity that grounded the challenge to the dynasty (Confucius, himself an ancient wise man, was generally criticized as an abettor of the hierarchical dynastic system). Public reformers even believed that the content of these texts, and the traditions that had developed from them, contributed to the west’s enviable scientific trajectory, a notion widely explored in journal essays and newspaper articles.⁴

In the China of today, there has been a sea-change. Once again, the western classics are a topic of conversation and debate, but the outlook is different. On the one hand, an academic field of western classics exists and has found institutional representation in many major universities, even if specific departments of western classics are still rare. This new development is thanks to the work of scholars who have worked hard to include

the topic in undergraduate education.⁵ On the other hand, in particular contexts classical texts have been galvanized into supporting ideas that uphold China's extant government—a fact partially made possible by their inclusion in the nationalistic topic of “studies in Chinese civilization” (国学 *guoxue*). Used in this way, these texts meet two receptions that produce the same result, criticism of the west and support for China. Either they are excoriated for the *bad* values they represent, in which case the west is seen as having inherited precisely those values; or they are praised for the *good* values they represent, in which case they are shown to be in harmony with contemporary (and also ancient) Chinese political and ethical theory. Socrates may be claimed to be a copy of Confucius; Aristotle may be read as a slave-monger; Thucydides was wise, and so was Plato. Originally considered relevant to China's problems of modernization, the western classics are now invoked in discussions that are deeply critical of the United States and Europe.

These classical western texts, and those of China's own classical tradition, have become newly important as China and the United States jostle for the position of moral superiority—a struggle in which they can claim to represent “harmony” or “democracy,” to criticize each other for human rights abuses and racism, or to point mutually to past atrocities. Part of this situation is normal enough: nationalists will often look to their own intellectual (and ethical) traditions to ground moral claims, especially in China, where a nearly unbroken tradition of Confucian philosophy is very much alive in the present day. But as the interest in the western classics shows, China is now in the unusual position of also turning to *other* intellectual traditions to ground its political ideology, uniting multiple traditions into a single pro-Chinese government argument reproduced by intellectuals, public thinkers, bloggers, and journalists alike. This

is striking. Imagine if texts from Chinese classics became a topic of public debate in the United States because they were deemed relevant to the government, and the *Book of Rites* helped to inform the American political scene.⁶ Imagine if the *Book of Poetry* (the Democrats claimed) endorsed the Democrats! No one would care. So, the Chinese development is all the more curious because, in the western culture at whose origin these classics (partly) lie, there is a growing sense that the works of classical antiquity have little to say and may not even deserve a place in the educational system. As universities in the United States are closing down their classics departments—judging them useless, the province of the elite, or worse still, purveyors of imperialism—the Chinese are reading about Plato in Party editorials.⁷

Why would the Chinese privilege the texts of a foreign antiquity to cast light upon their own present? The reasons are embedded in Chinese culture as well as in the changing circumstances of the country's political situation. For one, the Chinese deeply respect their own classics. The texts of the Confucian traditions (and, to a lesser extent, the Daoist and Buddhist traditions) have always shaped Chinese culture and thought.⁸ Although Confucius and his teachings were denounced and suppressed by Mao after his rise to power in 1949, that era is over. With the help of the government, different manifestations of Confucian traditions have rebounded as influential forces in contemporary Chinese society. Some modern thinkers (the “Neo-Confucians,” the New Confucians, and the “political Confucians”) are even suggesting that only a return to Confucian values will rescue the modern Chinese state from its current malaise as it floats somewhere between socialism with Chinese characteristics, a major force among market economies, and a political player on the world stage whose main rival is felt to be the United States.

Today in China, it is normal for ancient Chinese philosophy to be cited in nationalist rhetoric, and at the highest levels.⁹ Confucius's legacy has been deemed so important that President Xi Jinping regularly quotes him in speeches. In 2015, 135 of Xi's quotations from classical Chinese philosophy were even published in a book titled *Xi Jinping's Classical Allusions* (习近平用典 *Xi Jinping Yong Dian*) by the main Communist Party newspaper, *The People's Daily* (人民日报 *Renmin Ribao*).¹⁰ Most of Xi's quotes come from such Confucian classics as the *Analects* of Confucius, *The Book of Rites* (*Li Ji*), Mencius, Xunzi, and *The Book of History* (*Shujing*), and they often invoke moral exhortations or examples of a benign monarch governing the country.¹¹ For example, one citation Xi included from the *Analects* reads, "When a prince's personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders, but they will not be followed."¹² Presumably, this is meant to reassure the Chinese that however much power Xi may hold, the "prince's" authority is fundamentally moral, not authoritarian.¹³

In the west, I think it may be said that politicians do not hold up classical antiquity as a badge of national pride or urge its various ethical teachings on the public. Certainly, in the city where I live, Chicago, I have never heard the mayor urge us to contemplate the virtues of Seneca's *On Anger*. If the western nations do have Greek and Roman philosophy lurking deep in their political and ethical marrow, it's not the topic of much conversation in politics. Antiquity had its brief moment of glory at the birth of the United States, during the colonists' struggle for independence. At that time the Founding Fathers looked to ancient Greece and Rome for both guidance and warnings; James Madison famously eschewed the model of Athenian direct democracy and was wary of "the mob" because

he viewed it as too easily swayed by passion, a phenomenon antithetical to rational leadership.¹⁴

In contrast, Chinese interest in western antiquity is comparatively widespread. Looking to the continued vitality of ancient thought in their own culture, Chinese scholars have assumed, and continue to assume, that the study of western antiquity is a valuable source of information about the contemporary west. Some take that assumption further and view modern westerners as the direct product of Greco-Roman antiquity. On these grounds, studying the ancients would be a way to understand what is at the core of the west via the west's genealogical tie to some ur-essence, as it were. This view seems more or less pervasive: even at the high school level, Chinese textbooks proclaim that that western civilization descended straight from the glory days of ancient Athens.¹⁵ The standard history textbook I consulted, appropriately named *Normal High School Curriculum Standardized Experimental Textbook* (普通高中课程标准实验教科书 *Putong gaozhong kecheng biao zhun shiyan jiaokeshu*), identifies ancient Athens as the source of modern western democracy. It's not a new phenomenon, but a sentiment as old as the writings of several reformers at the end of the Qing period.¹⁶ Liang Qichao (1873–1929) stressed the point in his 1902 article “On Ancient Greek Scholarship” (论希腊古代学术 *Lun Xila Gudai Xueshu*), where he identified ancient Greece (especially Athens) as the source of contemporary western civilization. In short, this belief that the west is as fundamentally shaped by its classical antiquity as the Chinese are by theirs has guided Chinese engagement with the west from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day.

The value of Greco-Roman antiquity is not only intellectual and cultural, but also political. For some Chinese thinkers,

learning about antiquity has become a project aimed at outdoing the west on its own terms, the “key” to absorbing and overcoming the strengths of the west.¹⁷ The editorial statement of *The Chinese Journal of Classical Studies* (古典研究 *Gudian Yanjiu*) lays this out clearly. Founded in 2010 by Liu Xiaofeng, a leading public thinker, professor at Renmin University, and conservative who has written on Christianity, Leo Strauss, and Plato, and much more, the journal first notes that its mission is to “interpret the perennial classics of Chinese, western, Hebrew and Arabic civilizations on the basis of concrete texts from a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective.”¹⁸ It then proclaims its *raison d’être*—to use these classics to invest in China’s future.

Chinese civilization has a surefooted and temperate educational tradition. However, under the impact of the modern culture of western civilization, this tradition has already been shattered to pieces. For over 100 years, scholars of our country have faced the yet unfulfilled historical mission to command a profound understanding of western civilization and then to restore the spirit of China’s traditional civilization . . . If we do not understand the classical civilization of the west, we will probably be unable to have a comprehensive and profound grasp of modern western civilization, and if we do not have a thorough understanding of the whole pattern of western civilization, we will also not be able to fully and deeply understand and grasp the spiritual situation of Chinese civilization and its future destiny.¹⁹

Here the ultimate reason for the study of ancient western texts (and, to some degree, Hebrew ones) is to benefit China itself: to give China a cutting edge and vision of her future by understanding the alien world that is the west.²⁰

II. What's in It for the West?

Although I have explained why the Chinese might look to Greek antiquity, I have yet to suggest why the west might want to pay attention to the Chinese engagement with the west's "classical canon." Is there something to be learned by and for the west from looking at the Chinese engagement with classical antiquity—and with texts that many westerners themselves feel have little relevance to everyday life in modernity?²¹ Apart from scholarly interest in the context of comparative reception studies, is there a point to observing Chinese thinkers reading Plato or Aristotle? My answer is an emphatic yes. For one, the west can now see the Chinese watching the west. I don't mean as a sort of espionage. On the contrary, looking at how Chinese scholars read the west's classics provides the west with an opportunity to see itself in another culture's mirror. We can see our axiomatic assumptions reflected back at us in a way that can make them newly strange: assumptions like philosophy is based upon rationally deductive principles; or that democracy is the best form of government; or that the category of the citizen is or should be a universal one; or that the independent Cartesian ego is the foundation of selfhood; and so forth. Many such assumptions are seen by the Chinese as not self-evident, but rather as coming straight from classical western culture. From our perspective, these categories can feel natural because only rarely have we paused to ask if there is something unenlighteningly circular about interpreting the texts of classical antiquity with normative assumptions that partly grew out of that very same classical antiquity. The encounter with China shows us that such values are not universal; they are merely ours (and not even consistently so). For this reason, a study of the Chinese reception of these texts has the capacity to enable us to understand our own assumptions.

But there is more, exploring the changing history of the Chinese reception of Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, and others is a way of understanding what is happening inside China itself. The suppression of the democratic principles prized most by the west—which proved largely unsuccessful in Iraq and during the Arab Spring—bolstered the Chinese view that the attack on western values at Tiananmen Square was good policy in the end. Over the past three decades, the Chinese government has become quicker to assert the superiority of their own civilization over the west, particularly the superiority of the Confucian tradition to the western (“rationalist”) tradition. As a result, the history of how the Chinese have been reading western texts offers a uniquely illuminating vantage point for observing China’s transformation in its cultural and political self-confidence as it rises to the status of a competitor with the US on the world stage.

Turning to western texts to support Chinese claims of civilizational superiority requires a complicated balancing act on the part of the Chinese intellectuals. A central paradox which begs to be answered is: if western classics seem to support a political system more Chinese than western, why are we, the west as the heirs of that tradition, not closer to the Chinese ourselves? The Chinese explanation rests on a perceived turning point in the west since the Enlightenment. After that period of learning, (they say) the west fell away from classical values of virtue and civic responsibility. This is of course a trajectory that relies on broad brushstrokes and a certain disregard for the complexities of history and philosophy. Christianity, for example, is treated as playing a minimal role in shaping the modern west, while the eastern belief systems of Daoism and Buddhism are also short-changed in order to back the superiority of the new Confucian-themed society of twenty-second-century socialist China.²²

The Chinese scholars in this group pointedly disregard the Renaissance theory and practice of virtue ethics in politics, perhaps because it looks too similar to Confucian thought or, perhaps because it was not very successful.²³

III. From “Master Li” to Chairman Xi

To recognize the magnitude of the shift the Chinese people experienced with the fall of the Qing, we must remind ourselves that, until the late nineteenth century, the Chinese elite believed themselves to represent not only the geographically central “Middle Kingdom,” but also a culture superior to that of all other nations, in which they accordingly took little interest.²⁴ The so-called “Mandate of Heaven” ensured that the emperor held his position by divine *fiat*; wars and changes of dynasty simply meant that the Mandate had passed to a new emperor “of all the lands under heaven” (*tianxia*). This belief in China’s cultural superiority crumpled over the second half of the nineteenth century, as the Chinese experienced military defeat at the hands of the British and French in the Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1856–60 as well as the colonization of major coastal cities such as Shanghai and Hong Kong. Subsequent attempts at internal reform influenced by contact with the west contributed to the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911—and a new void in the leadership of the country.

Crucially for us, the first decades after the fall of the Qing were rich in debate about what a post-dynastic China should look like. The overthrow of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the subsequent humiliation of China by the European powers who crafted the Versailles Treaty led many Chinese reformers and thinkers to look beyond China for new ideas about citizenship, government, and national development. The sense that the

country could learn from the western powers was influential in producing the “May 4th Movement” of 1919, in which students and reformers called for democratic values, a commitment to science, and an end to the old patriarchal culture.²⁵ The reformers of the Qing dynasty at the turn of the twentieth century seized on western political theory for answers—going all the way back to Aristotle’s *Politics*, which was cited for the argument that human beings were unfulfilled unless they were citizens of a state and political actors.²⁶ As mentioned previously, some thinkers even traced the triumph of democracy and science in the west—the reformers’ twin desiderata—to causes as old as the culture of classical Athens.

However, the ascendance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) greatly changed this intellectual climate. In 1949, after decades of struggle between rival warlords, Mao and the CCP took power, and interest in classical political texts waned accordingly. It was not until the famous economic reforms set in motion by Deng Xiaoping in late 1978 (改革开放 *gaige kaifang* “reform and opening up”—and “it doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white”) that liberal democratic tendencies once again crept into the public domain and would-be reformers agitated for political reform and greater freedom of the press. The subsequent government clampdown once again influenced the reading of classics of political and philosophical antiquity. Yet the classics came back—with a difference. Those two great moments—the May 4th Movement and the current interest in western antiquity—are the topic of this book, along with an earlier encounter of two worlds during the Jesuit mission to China.

The chapters follow an arc in time from the mid-sixteenth century, when the Jesuits first brought classical texts to China, to the events of the tumultuous twentieth century, and on to the present day. Chapter 1, “Jesuits and Visionaries,” revisits the

Jesuit mission to China (especially in the person of Matteo Ricci, or “Li Madou”), the May 4th Movement of the early twentieth century, and the years leading up to June 4, 1989. We start with the Jesuits because they so well illustrate how one might use classical texts to further one’s own agenda—a context in which it’s westerners who are cast as the appropriators of antiquity. The rest of the book explores approaches to the classics that reflect trends in contemporary China. Many of the scholars I discuss share a belief in the validity of “ancient values,” both Confucian and Platonic, but feel disdain for the United States. Others take to task the political texts that have traditionally underpinned such basic ideas as citizenship, rule of law, democratic voting, and citizen government.

Chapter 2 addresses examples of reception that are hostile to Aristotle’s *Politics* and Athenian democracy. Some authors recast the “free” Athenian citizen as a slave to his polis, while in other hands democracy is rebranded as a “superstition” (the Mandarin word is 迷信 *mixin*, roughly “confused faith.”) For some, the *real* democracy is China. Tracing an example of pro-China interpretation, Chapter 3 examines the reception of a famous section of Plato’s *Republic*: the picture of the “beautiful city” painted by Socrates (ironically? earnestly? allegorically?) for his interlocutors. This proposed city-state—Kallipolis—deeply disturbs modern scholars of Plato for its eugenic vision of an ideal society in which people are ranked in three castes.²⁷ To perpetrate this hierarchy, a “Noble Lie” is needed to explain it as a natural phenomenon traceable back to mother Earth herself. The Lie will be believed by generations that come after the philosophical mastermind that crafted it, both underpinning an ideology that largely blocks movement between classes and categorizing this society as “just.” Chinese ideological reactions to Kallipolis are fascinating, not least because it’s impossible to

tell if writers who endorse the necessity of a Noble Lie in politics are actually engaging in an exposé of their government!

Chapter 4 focuses on another debate with roots in Plato and Aristotle: what role does rationality play in human thriving? The study of rationality as a comparative cultural phenomenon is a topic of serious scholarly debate in some contexts (the difficulty of defining the term “rationality” being part of the problem).²⁸ However, some Chinese intellectuals are simply manipulating the term as a means of showing the moral vacuum at the heart of the west. Western rationality, they say, promotes technology at the cost of ethics. It operates outside of, not within, any moral framework, and, as such, it is free to be entirely instrumental in its operation: the most efficient way of getting something done is the best way. This western “instrumental” rationality is often traced to Kant, but also back to Plato—after all, Plato, with his desire for a rational city ruled by the most rational men, is easily implicated here. Interestingly, the Chinese condemn the west using a western critique, taking much of their terminology and their perspective from the German socialist Max Weber. Following other European thinkers, some Chinese scholars are just about willing to claim that Plato caused the Holocaust.

Chapter 5 turns to the wild popularity (only just now abating) of the conservative political thinker Leo Strauss among Chinese thinkers and asks how and why this phenomenon came to be. Part of the answer has to do with Strauss’s own views on the value of classical texts, which give these texts a political and philosophical importance essentially in aeternum (a very Chinese way of thinking about tradition) while denigrating the present moment in western civilization. Equally importantly, Strauss elevated the philosopher’s role to a speaker of riddling truths critical of the status quo (hence making him politically

relevant). Furthermore, he provided a model of how to interpret philosophical texts in support of one's own political and ethical beliefs. And finally, Strauss too was concerned about the limits of reason: as Leora Batnitzky puts it, Strauss was concerned with "the philosophical, theological, and political consequences of what he took to be modern philosophy's overinflated claims for the self-sufficiency of reason."²⁹ The statement of this problem, for Strauss, could be found in philosophers such as Plato, Maimonides, and Spinoza (as long as one searched for esoteric messages hidden from the general public).

Chapter 6 focuses on the florescence of Confucian-based nationalism in China over the past twenty years—a far cry from the disdain for Confucian texts in the earlier days of the CCP, when Mao condemned the old sage and his teachings. Confucianism now underpins the new nationalism by offering it an intellectual and ethical history; some public voices have gone so far as to link Confucianism to concerns about ecology and sustainability. Hu Jintao's stress on the Confucian value of harmony (*hexie*), now with Xi Jinping's added emphasis on "a harmonious society of the future," allows the government to lay claim to a new domestic and foreign policy deeply in contrast to western "aggression." Seeking to represent these Confucian values as universals, intellectuals turn to readings of Confucius that claim deep parallels to the themes of Plato's *Republic*, especially given that "harmony" and "justice" are collapsed into one concept. The theme of musical harmony and its relationship to the emotions also seems to offer a superficial parallel. Plato and Confucius, then, will lead us forward in a new (China-dominated) world order. But of the two, Confucius is still shown to be superior in his thought. In three recent conferences about Socrates and Confucius, the Chinese argued Confucian harmony improves on Socratic antagonism, and the latter's repudiation of

tradition is singled out for criticism—and likewise, the modern west’s “repudiation” of the hierarchical, supposedly merit-based *Kallipolis* that lies at the foundation of its own tradition of political thought.³⁰

Given the potential value of classical texts in Chinese ideology and their service in the cause of Chinese nationalism, there is conflict in Chinese academic circles about what one *should* do with these texts. This battle pits together some of the loudest public intellectuals against essentially apolitical professors.³¹ In a 2015 interview, ten foreign-trained Chinese classicists—including such senior figures as Huang Yang (Greek history, Fudan University), Nie Minli (Greek philosophy, Renmin University), and Liu Jinyu (Roman history, DePauw University)—made explicit their desire for the study of these classical texts to be formally institutionalized in university departments, with strict language training and the study of western historiography as well.³² The Chinese classicists voiced a desire to collaborate and be in dialogue with contemporary western classicists. And they spoke also of their distance from the other, more prominent figures who have been open about their pro-Chinese agenda, such as Gan Yang and Liu Xiaofeng.³³ This latter group seeks to create a different sort of classical studies that (1) takes Chinese tradition into account alongside the western one, and (2) is directly relevant to contemporary Chinese politics. Gan and Liu are also the very visible leaders of the Chinese Comparative Classical Studies Association, *Zhongguo Bijiao Gudianxue Xuehui* (founded in 2009 by the collaborative effort of six universities), which has openly echoed the sentiment of the editorial pages of the journal *Gudian Yanjiu*—ultimately the study of the western classics must be for the greater good of China.³⁴

As indicated earlier, the intention of this study is not to criticize the readings or appropriations (however we define that) of

western classical texts by the subjects of this book.³⁵ Instead, my interest is in how ideologies shape readings (a point not without relevance for the debates now prevalent in the US about the value of the classics, and whether they have anything to say to anyone but a defunct elite). The texts that shaped much western philosophy and political thought can function as a mirror to the changing mood of China *and* the US on the global stage, past, present, and possibly future. One benefit of understanding this will be, hopefully, that we will be able to move on from the more facile political narratives and virtue-claims produced by thinkers and theorists in both countries.

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