

Modernisation of Chinese Culture

Modernisation of Chinese Culture: Continuity and Change

Edited by

Jana S. Rošker and Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik

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This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4593-0, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4593-9

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors are grateful to the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for its generous support of their research work which enabled them to publish the present book.

INTRODUCTION

MODERNISATION OF CHINESE CULTURE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

JANA S. ROŠKER

The year 2011 marked the 100th anniversary of the Xinhai Revolution, which began with the Wuchang Uprising on 10 October, 1911 and ended with the abdication of Emperor Puyi on 12 February, 1912 and the establishment of the first Chinese republic. The centennial is significant not only in terms of state ideology, but also with respect to academic research into Chinese society and culture. The red-letter date of 10 October, 1911 signifies much more than just the establishment of a new state formation, and figures as the starting point and first step in the century-long process of explosive economic development and political progress which saw China evolve into a major power in the contemporary world. This historic turning point likewise represents the symbolic and concrete linkages and tensions between tradition and modernity, progress and conservatism and traditional values, and the demands for adjusting to contemporary society and social conditions.

The present volume consists of select contributions from the 2nd STCS (Specific Topics in Chinese Studies) Conference, which was held to commemorate the centennial in Ljubljana, Slovenia in October, 2011. It is dedicated to modern China and focuses on the 100 years following the Xinhai Revolution. The book's governing concept is the awareness of the fact that China's shift from tradition to modernity confronts us with a series of problems which are linked to transformations of both material and ideal paradigms that not only defined the development of Chinese society, but also strongly influenced international relations at the global level. Strategic solutions to these problems must avail themselves of broader perspectives, which are rooted and find their meaning within the context of China's cultural and traditional background.

Over the past few decades, the theoretical streams of contemporary sinology and modern Chinese philosophy have devoted increasing attention to investigating and comparing the substantial and methodological assumptions of the so-called “Eastern” and “Western” traditions. The ever-growing number of studies in this area is driven, in part, by the increasingly urgent need to clarify the methodological foundations of modern sinological theory, which must keep abreast of the technological and political developments in the Chinese context. The present collection thus focuses upon the specific reactions of different Chinese material and cultural discourses to modernisation, in an approach which is directed towards articulating and establishing a historically consistent, specifically “Chinese” view of modernity and transformation.

China is undoubtedly one of the world’s fastest growing societies, and the present book carefully maps the Chinese modernisation discourse, highlighting its relationship to similar discourses and situating it within historical and theoretical contexts. In contrast to the majority of recent discussions of a “Chinese development model”, that tend to focus more on institutional than cultural factors, and are more narrowly concerned with economic than overall social development, the present collection provides a number of important focal points for many currently overlooked issues and dilemmas. The multifaceted perspectives contained in this anthology are not limited to economic, social, and ecological issues, but also include the political and social functions of ideologies and culturally conditioned values, which represent the axial epistemological grounds of modern Chinese society.

All the articles contained herein are original contributions, many of which stem or take their departure from recent theoretical discoveries in the field of Chinese studies, which have overturned the long held classic sociological view that traditional Chinese culture was incompatible with modernisation. Each study adds texture and “grain” to an alternative, emerging picture of the mix of universal and particular features (including problems) within Chinese modernity.

However, the present volume is not limited to introducing the main material conditions that shape the specific features of current Chinese society; but also seeks to shed new light on the political, social and ideological backgrounds of the specifically Chinese modernisation process as such. As a result, the reader will hopefully come to grasp why the modernisation of Chinese society cannot be equated with Westernisation.

The guiding concept adopted in the present collection rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past, and the often convoluted

processes by which that past developed into the present. The interdisciplinary approaches privileged herein reveal a new image of the very nature of Chinese modernity, often questioning the absolute authority and putative objectivity of official explanations. The extended scope of the contributions is representative of a new image of the relationship between China's past and present. In this sense, the present collection will hopefully help define new theoretical and methodological approaches in Chinese studies, which bring to the fore a new idea of intercultural encounters based upon a new culture of recognition. It is the conviction of editors that the book will be of great value to a wide range of scholars, students and civil and social actors who have an active interest in Chinese history, culture and society. Hopefully, it will also be of interest to a more general readership, that might appreciate a critical academic reflection on the legitimacy of classical Western modernisation theories, against the background of the issue of "Modernisation with Chinese characteristics".

The contributions all come from experts in various fields of Chinese studies, and mainly address issues of Chinese modernisation, and the question of how to amalgamate the Chinese tradition with various social and cultural implications of the modern era. In this sense, the collection targets the following domains:

- Recent research on the problems of the Chinese tradition and modernity, including history, literature, philosophy, religion, art, media studies, anthropology, sociology, economics, politics and environmental issues;
- Critical academic reflection on the first intercultural dialogues between China and European countries;
- Political, ideological, cultural, and axiological evaluations of Chinese development over the last 100 years;
- Traditional elements in modern Chinese discourses;
- (Re)interpretations of specific structures and functional models of modern and contemporary Chinese society, providing new modes of comprehension of historical, cultural, political and economic changes in modern Chinese society;
- The nature and magnitude of China's impact upon economic, political and cultural tendencies in today's globalised world;
- New kinds of historical inquiry into the most characteristic aspects of Chinese modernity.

These research areas are also significant because they enable us to examine the broader impact of modern Chinese discourses that have a profound influence on political, economic and cultural relations between

Europe and China. Hence, a further aim is to establish new methodological paradigms for intercultural studies, thereby moving beyond the conventional academic views of research areas which are still (latently, at least) skewed by Western frames of reference. Such views fail to adequately represent a sampling of all possible conceptual positions, upon which any knowledge must be based. The present volume thus constitutes an initial attempt to lay an assumptive foundation in the pragmatic search for specific sets of methods that could serve as a new theoretical framework for intercultural studies.

The present volume opens with three contributions that introduce the historical era of cultural and philosophical modernisation in China. Jana S. Rošker's article provides a systematic and wide-ranging introduction to the most important theoretical currents that have shaped the intellectual transformation of China, on the cusp between tradition and modernity. These currents merit close scrutiny for what they can tell us about the present, and the role of one of mankind's most important philosophical legacies in the contemporary world. Within the framework of transformations which deeply influenced these currents, Helena Motoh's article focuses on the so-called "cultural construction" debate in China in the first two decades of the 20th century. This debate focused primarily on what constituted the particular "Chinese quality" of Chinese culture, whether Chinese leaders and the nation should attempt to preserve it and how they were to achieve this end. The author shows why and how certain elements of this debate are still relevant within contemporary ideologies in the PRC. In the final contribution to this introductory chapter, Jarkko Haapanen offers a critical analysis of the "new thought trends" which—in their differing versions—are shaping a new image of Chinese modernisation discourses.

The institutional and historiographical background of these thought trends is explored in detail in the second chapter, which has its focus the political and historical influence of Liang Qichao, a major theoretical figure during China's transition into the 20th century. Both contributions clearly show how and why the use and abuse of ideas in China can be assessed in the light of constantly changing and contingent social and political structures. Ma Jun investigates Liang Qichao's ideas regarding the form and structure of the State and stresses those features of his political position that ran counter to the prevailing views of his time. Marija Šuler shows how Liang, despite his putative conservatism, argued for a new historical narrative, advocating a historiographic revolution that would lay the foundation for more coherent and complex

critical studies in Chinese history. A century later, this vision is still profoundly influencing our understanding of Chinese modernisation.

The main features of the political and institutional changes that have led China through a wideranging process of social transformation to modernity, are reflected and documented in the new Chinese literature. Changes in literature—which is probably the Chinese cultural medium with the most profound social and political impact—have been underway in China since the 19th century, and the first two articles explore some of these changes in literary genres and in the socio-political function of literature. The third article elaborates on some key questions concerning literary history and criticism, while the fourth reveals some of the new directions being taken by various modern and contemporary Chinese prose writers.

Raoul David Findeisen's provocative contribution questions the very concept of "Chinese modernity" (especially with respect to its specific chronological categorisation) in the context of modern literary history, and shows how the structuring of such history as "recent", "modern" or "contemporary" has routinely been influenced by ideological elements. Charles Kwong instead analyses the new, vernacular literature that emerged in the course of cultural modernisation, focusing in particular on its artificial separation from traditional classic forms and the prosodic elements inherent in specific features of the Chinese language. Martin Winter's contribution closes this chapter with a survey of the development of Chinese literature since 2000, in which he stresses the close connection with various historical and political factors of the last century.

The following chapter opens with Tina Ilgo's analysis of Lu Xun's short stories. She emphasises that, in literary terms, Chinese modernisation was a process of questioning traditional Chinese culture and was marked by the search for a new, modern Chinese identity. Ilgo underscores the role of a symbolic linkage between this modernisation process and the image of the moon. This nearest of celestial bodies is one of the central motifs in Lu Xun's work, where it represents both enlightenment and insanity. The following essay by Ho Shun-yee examines another aspect of this process, and reveals the life and sentiments of the Chinese people through the eyes of the authors of *Ten Years*, an anthology of short fiction published in 1936. Liu Xi then analyses the contemporary novel *Zhi Ma* by woman writer, Zhang Kangkang. She shows how contemporary Chinese prose is still often imbued with post-socialist modernity discourses which promote and celebrate urbanisation and the free market, but without fully

interrogating or unmasking the deeply institutionalised overlappings of gender, class and power in both rural and urban society.

The next chapter deals with issues relating to art and its broader social implications. Building on earlier studies on the production of art, reception aesthetics and cultural capital, the authors investigate the construction of meaning and its specific connections with the Chinese transition into modernity, showing how this process can be better interpreted and understood through art and artistic media. In the first contribution, Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik offers valuable insights into the connection between early modern Chinese art and politics, and analyses the tensions between Western influence and traditional legacies in the modernisation process of Chinese art. Tania Becker next introduces one of the most intriguing phenomena in contemporary art, namely the public art of Ai Weiwei, and his role as internet activist and civil rights agitator/advocate in challenging political power structures in present-day China. Her detailed account of the dialectic of art and censorship in hyperspace takes the reader inside the new, virtual China which is unfolding in real time, even as we speak.

For China, the 20th century was a period of continuous upheaval and sweeping social change. While Western culture manifested itself in its most violent and aggressive form in a series of economic and military invasions, the theoretical discourses that entered China in the wake of its troops and capitalism were seen primarily as a challenge. This challenge was expressed in the specific language of modern formalism and the social function of reason as embodied in modern science and technology, together with longstanding Western ideas on the state, law and democracy. At a more technical level, it also appeared in the form of various theoretical methodologies, as well as in concepts and categories specific to the history of Western thought. Especially challenging were the elementary methodological conditions that determined this set of new, mostly unknown categories and concepts, such as the demand for evidence or the formally flawless positing of essential assumptions and conclusions, explicit argumentation and accurately formulated definitions. The sixth chapter of this collection therefore deals with specific concrete problems connected to these issues. In her article on the introduction of sociology in modern China, Mariarosaria Gianninoto shows how, notwithstanding the need to comprehend, explore and apply Western ideas and ideal concatenations, the acceptance of these foreign theories was essentially superficial and the Chinese tradition of thought proved to be much more resilient and flexible than first appeared. In her article on Chinese-English translations of neologisms in online dictionaries, Mateja Petrovčič shows

how and why these issues, in the context of global communications, are still significant in contemporary China.

One of the assumptions of the present volume is that certain relations between social contexts and specific Chinese cultural forms and media in the process of Chinese modernisation need to be not only theorised, but also empirically examined, especially in the accelerating continuum of political and economic globalisation. The final chapter is therefore dedicated to detailed investigations of a number of crucial issues in contemporary Chinese economics, ecology and social studies. The chapter opens with Mitja Saje's article on the role of ideological cycles and their function in the context of the modern economy. In this specific cultural-historic context, the author critically explores what is generally known as "Chinese capitalism" and raises important questions concerning the relation between the modern Chinese economy and what appears to be a new phase within the global economic system. While the liberalisation of its system has definitely made China one of the fastest growing economies in the world, it is equally undeniable that public health has deteriorated significantly since the introduction of the so-called socialist market economy. Eva Sternfeld's contribution deals with one of the most dramatic reminders of social and economic dangers deriving from China's explosive economic growth. In her article on China's environmental situation, she examines the challenges facing China's energy sector and discusses the policies and strategies that are in rapid evolution today, in order to guarantee energy security, while improving environmental and climate protection. Wang Xuan's article deals with one of the most serious and disturbing consequences of massive internal migration in contemporary China, itself a consequence of major imbalances in regional economic development. This large-scale migration not only changes the lives of migrants, but also has profound effects on those who are left behind. Wang Xuan's investigation of the reality and life-prospects of the rural "left-behind children" clearly points to the necessity of implementing and improving better social security mechanisms in order to achieve a more equitable level of well-being in the population.

The wide range and scope of the contributions gathered in the present collection indicate that the transition from tradition to modernity in China cannot be understood within the framework of an all-encompassing and unified social model, but requires a series of complex investigations into the interrelations among the physical environment, social structures, philosophy, history and culture. Hopefully, this approach will shed new

light on a number of core assumptions of academic inquiry, and open up new directions in the study of culture and society in China.

INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

CHAPTER ONE

NEW TRENDS IN THEORY AND IDEOLOGY: THE MAIN THEORETICAL CURRENTS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

JANA S. ROŠKER

For China, the 20th century was a period of continuous upheaval and sweeping social change. At the end of the 19th century, the ancient “Middle Kingdom”—despite its immense geopolitical dimensions—found itself on the margins of the modern world, as part of its semi-colonial periphery. While Western culture manifested itself at its most violent and aggressive in the form of economic and military invasions, Western philosophy, which entered China in the train of Western capital and its troops, was seen mainly as a challenge. (Cheng 2002, 371) This challenge was expressed in the specific language of modern formal logic and analysis and in the social function of reason as embodied in modern science and technology, as well as in the Western idea of the state, law and democracy. At a more technical level, it also appeared in forms of Cartesian Dualism and their structure of mutually contradictory polarities and in the formal frame of traditional European dialectic, as well as in the concepts and categories specific to the Western history of thought, such as the notions of substance, objectivity, truth, and so forth. Especially challenging were the elementary methodological conditions that determined this confusing set of new, mostly unknown categories and concepts, such as the demand for evidence or the formally flawless establishment of essential assumptions and conclusions, explicit argumentation and accurately formulated definitions.

Despite the need to understand, explore and apply Western ideas and ideal concatenations, the acceptance of these foreign theories was essentially a superficial phenomenon and the Chinese tradition of thought proved to be much more resiliant and flexible than first appeared.

Although the sinified “Marxism-Leninism” that prevailed in China during the latter half of the 20th century as the new state ideology derived from Western theories, social functions continued to be regulated to a great extent by traditional Confucian concepts.

Political and Ideological Developments

After the decline of the Empire and the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, Chinese thought continued to develop in the spirit of confronting Western ideas while contemporaneously attempting to modernise the autochthonous Chinese philosophical tradition. While one group of thinkers, whose approach can be epitomised by their slogan “preserving the Chinese essence and applying the Western sciences (中學為體, 西學為用)”, occupied this middle ground, two more radical currents began to take shape among the Chinese intellectuals of this period. The first of these advocated the complete elimination of the Chinese tradition and a total Westernisation of culture and thought (全盤西化), while the second argued for the renewal and rebirth (復古主義) of the tradition in the form of a new, dominant culture (中國本位文化).

Politically, the period of the First Republic was still characterised by a profound crisis and a generalised instability. Under the guise of parliamentary democracy, governmental policies were determined by the authoritarian ambitions and power struggles among rival generals. However, with the outbreak of WWI, China became witness to the bankruptcy of European political theories, as the major Western powers entered into a protracted spiral of devastation and bloodletting. These events naturally damped the previous Chinese enthusiasm for progressive European thought, and those who had seen in Western philosophy and science the most advanced stage of human civilisation, were very shaken by this experience. The growing demand for a sweeping reform of thought and culture that had emerged from the various rejections of the outmoded Confucian tradition, finally exploded in the so-called May Fourth Movement (五四運動). This movement, which began on 4 May, 1919 with student demonstrations in the Square of Heavenly Peace in Peking¹, would play a crucial role in the cultural, political and ideal modernisation of Chinese society. Its main publication, *New Youth* (新青年), which had been founded by Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 in 1915, soon became the most influential journal of its kind and a

¹ The immediate cause of this demonstration was the decision of the Versailles Conference to cede the Chinese Shandong province to Japan.

point of reference for a new generation of Chinese intellectuals. The spirit of the future New China was expressed in its demands for the abolition of obsolete Confucian thought and conservative strictures, which were seen as hindering the free development of individuals and society. It also advocated equality between the sexes and free love², and the end of economic and political domination by the privileged classes. For the New Intellectuals, these demands formed the basis and precondition for a more equitable distribution of the material and ideal resources of Chinese society. All these demands were naturally connected to the need for fundamental changes in the general mindset of the people. *New Youth*, for example, published its articles in colloquial or vernacular language (白話), thereby giving a major impulse to the gradual superseding of ancient Chinese (文言) as the only acceptable form of public writing. Ancient Chinese was an archaic language which differed radically from modern Chinese, and could only be learned through the lengthy and costly process of a classical education. The exclusive use of ancient Chinese, which was only accessible to the tiny minority of the privileged classes, resulted in the vast majority of the Chinese population being completely cut off from any form of written culture, even if one were not completely illiterate. The so-called “vernacular movement” (白話運動) thus became a cornerstone of the new Chinese culture. This spiritual offspring of the May Fourth Movement first manifested itself in the flowering of the new literature, which was produced by the so-called New Intellectuals and was profoundly influenced by Western literary forms and canons. The new literature differed greatly from traditional literary production, not only in terms of language, but also in its contents and subject matter.

However, only a few years after its inception, the May Fourth Movement would disappear, swallowed up by the power struggle between the Communist (共產黨) and Nationalist (國民黨) parties, which only added more tension to an already unstable domestic political situation. The political and military conflicts, accompanied by the chronic corruption and ineffectiveness of the governing Nationalist Party, sounded as a prelude to the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (1931), which was followed by the general Japanese invasion six years later. With the end of WWII (which in China was known as the Anti-Japanese War, (抗日戰爭), the conflicts between the Nationalists and Communists erupted into civil war, which

² These demands did not signify a sexual revolution based upon promiscuity, but the free choice of marriage partners, as opposed to traditional arranged marriages agreed between families or clans.

ended in 1949 with the victory of the Communists and the founding of the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976). The political leadership of the defeated Nationalist party emigrated to the island of Formosa (Taiwan 台灣), where it established a government in exile that continued the political tradition of the Republic of China. In the People's Republic, the censorship of the previous Nationalist government, which had been applied unofficially in all areas of public life, was replaced by a systematic intellectual control that permitted only the reiteration and interpretation of Marxist thought in strict accordance with the changing priorities of the ruling elite. The government and the Communist party reformed the university system, which had been established in China at the start of the 20th century based on the British and American model. The Communist reform of higher education was founded upon the ideological directives formulated by Mao Zedong in his famous Yan'an speech (1942) on cultural and intellectual policy. This was followed by a period of massive, centralised campaigns directed against both the traditional and modern spiritual opponents of the new regime. Attempts to liberate China from this repressive yoke resulted in the short-lived Hundred Flowers Movement (百華運動, 1956), which was quickly suffocated by a new Anti-Rightist (反右派) movement. The fiasco of the utopian economic-political campaign of the Great Leap Forward (大躍進, 1958) was followed by the period of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (無產階級文化大革命, 1966–1976). The Cultural Revolution, which was rooted in the intrigues and power struggles within the highest cadres of the ruling elite, succeeded in completely destroying all the newly established educational structures and ruthlessly eliminated several million intellectuals. Even those who were spared this fate were mostly exiled to rural areas to experience the hard life of the peasant masses and thereby “re-educate” themselves regarding crucial matters of life and politics. After a decade of this movement, which was marked by political and economic chaos, ideological repression, and the impossibility of performing any valid intellectual work, China experienced two decades of relative internal stability and a gradual “ideological liberation (解放思想)” under Deng Xiaoping's 鄧小平 policy of external openness and economic reforms. This period, however, was brutally interrupted on June 4, 1989 with the massacre of the students demonstrating for a more rapid democratisation of Chinese society in the Square of Heavenly Peace (天安門), in Peking. Many Chinese intellectuals reacted to this event with nihilism or a resigned withdrawal from intellectual activity, and the free development of contemporary Chinese thought was blocked for several

more years, with public debate on these issues only gradually re-emerging in the final years of the century.

However, after 1949, Taiwanese society was likewise marked by a fairly rigid political dictatorship and generalised intellectual control and only with the economic growth of the last two decades of the 20th century did a greater intellectual freedom become possible.

The renaissance of contemporary Chinese thought has been reflected primarily in the development and elaboration of Marxist thought, the search for synthesis between Western theories and ancient Chinese, particularly Confucian tradition, and a new, specific Chinese liberalism.

The development of modern Chinese thought, which began to emerge at the end of the 19th century, was therefore interrupted at the end of the 1930s for four decades. And while today contemporary Chinese philosophy is at last slowly awaking from a long sleep, we need to consider the millennial scale of time and vast expanses of space that have determined the unfolding of the Chinese tradition. In this perspective, four decades are but an instant, a breath fogging the glass. In any case, this new awakening, which in many respects resembles the so-called Golden period of Chinese philosophy during the era of the Warring States (戰國, 475–221 BC), seems well-prepared to face the challenges of the global age.

The Changing Role of Confucianism

In traditional China, Confucianism served as a state doctrine, based upon ethical paradigms which were claimed to have been derived directly from Confucius' thought, as first formulated in the 4th century BC. In this respect, the formal critique of all other ideologies was totally moot, due to their incompatibility with this paradigmatic "truth", while on a symbolic level the "genuine" teachings of Confucius represented that legal instance which ensured, in the context of traditional culture, the generally accepted "correctness" (正) of social interactions, and especially the "proper" implementation of government policies. Based on this view of society, and its ideologies and values system, it appears as perfectly logical that the educated elite should, during periods of crisis, seek a solution to social chaos by exploring and correcting the "implementation" of this ideological foundation of the state.

Although a dogmatism of this kind resembles the ideological functions of state religions in Western societies, the difference lies in the absolute pragmatism and utilitarianism of Confucian ethics, while the consequences of this difference are much more far-reaching than may first appear. And

while it is certainly true that the Confucians did not permit any critical questioning of the prevailing doctrine in the social sphere (i.e. in the area to which it actually referred), its neglect of the metaphysical sphere and the absence of any imperative to prove the accuracy of its ethical premises with non-social arguments, meant that Confucianism—as opposed to Christian or Islamic ideal systems—at least tolerated a certain subjective freedom. In any case, in China, the “proper origin” of any essential paradigm still forms the basis of the “legitimacy” of any theory. The only difference in this regard between classical and modern China is that Confucianism was replaced by Marxist dialectical materialism more than half a century ago.

After representing the central state doctrine and ideological foundation of traditional Chinese society for two thousand years, beginning in the 19th century it became clear that Confucianism, at least in its orthodox traditional form, could no longer serve as an ideal basis for the further development of modern society. In the early 20th century, this criticism of Confucianism was best exemplified in the May Fourth Movement, which was both nationalist in its opposition to Japanese and Western imperialism, and reformist in its sweeping criticism of the ossification and deleterious effects of traditional state doctrine. However, this period also planted the seeds of so-called Modern Confucianism (新儒學)³, which arose as a critical attempt to revitalise and modernise this fundamental ancient tradition of thought. This current was distinguished by a comprehensive attempt to revitalise traditional (particularly Confucian and Neo-Confucian) thought by means of new influences borrowed or derived from Western systems. In this search for synthesis, the spirit of German idealism was especially important, while certain approaches of the Viennese circle also attracted a number of exponents of this current. During the first twenty-five years of the People’s Republic this current, at least officially, was reduced to silence; however, their main concerns and tenets continued to be developed by Taiwanese theorists and, to a certain extent, also by those from Hong Kong. Over the last two decades, with the explosive economic liberalisation of the People’s Republic of China, this

³ The term *Xin ruxue* 新儒學 has sometimes been translated literally as *The New Confucianism* or as *Contemporary Confucianism* by some Western authors. To avoid confusing it with the traditional School of Principles (*li xue* 理學), generally denoted as *Neo-Confucianism* or *New Confucianism* in Western sources, we shall omit the literal translation and apply the most frequently used term, *Modern Confucianism*.