

# Introduction

## On the Possibility of Chinese Thought as Global Theory

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Globalization has expanded connections and narrowed distances between cultural, ethnic, and social groups. These developments would suggest an ever-greater inclusion of global thought traditions to stand not only as the *objects* of academic inquiry, but also as its generative structure and vocabulary. However, despite sophisticated examinations by sociologists, literary theorists, historians, anthropologists, and others about the nature of cultural exchange, the descriptions and theorizations of such trends remain firmly committed to a theoretical vocabulary that emerged largely from the languages and experiences of the Anglo-European world. Even those research paradigms most critical of Eurocentrism—including postcolonialism and comparative political theory—tend to frame their theoretical contributions as *internal* critiques of existing Europeanized discourses<sup>1</sup> or as reminders of “both equivalences and differences” across cultures.<sup>2</sup> This absence of non-Western theoretical “voices” is particularly troubling, if, as Charles Taylor and others have argued, the human sciences differ from the natural sciences in that they seek not to discover natural causal laws, but to clarify the self-explanations of social actors and to articulate the norms that are essential to those explanations.<sup>3</sup> In a deeply interconnected, multipolar world, the rigorous self-explanations of ethnic groups *other* than Anglo-Europeans should have their place in structuring legitimate social inquiry.

This proposed volume attends to this more ambitious exploration of how, and under what conditions, so-called non-Western traditions of thought can serve to inspire and structure more generally applicable social

and political theory, with a particular focus on Chinese thought. Contributors inquire specifically about the conditions, both domestic and international, under which scholars within and outside the Sinophone academic world can move Chinese theories and experiences from “local knowledge” to “universal knowledge”—and in the process “rethink China” (*chong si Zhongguo*), as scholars such as Zhao Tingyang have recently urged us to do.<sup>4</sup> These essays therefore aim to do more than simply point out how “Western” universality can be self-reflexively interrogated, even as they reject the existence of some prefigured “core” of religious or social values readily transportable to the late-modern West. Their task is thus an inherently theoretical one, in that they ask how the distinct experiences motivating the production of new knowledge for and within particular Chinese locales (such as Maoism or contemporary Chinese engagements with democracy) might be reinscribed with more general significance.

This approach contrasts with dominant approaches to Asian thought since the 1990s, when the “Asian Values” debate piqued interest in the possibility of a distinctly Asian perspective on sociopolitical questions. Such scholarship often articulates some given set of values purportedly held by peoples of the Asian region,<sup>5</sup> or attempts to discover “Chinese” analogues of particular Western concepts such as democracy or justice.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, this volume does not focus directly on how the terms of Confucianism or Chinese thought can be “modernized.” Rather, contributors explore, through example, the possibility that scholars of any national background might work *from* or *within* particular non-Western intellectual discourses (of which Confucianism is only one among many others) to produce rigorous contributions to existing work in the humanities and the social sciences. Along the way, we interrogate rather than assume the conditions under which particular forms of Chinese knowledge, values, or ideas come to be seen as useful or relevant. Instead of constructing an equivalence between “local” Chinese findings and some more “universal” theory such as Marxism or democracy, these chapters explore how the comparison might be reversed to accord Chinese experiences more authoritative generality. Much as, for example, the French Revolution is seen not as some local iteration of democratic practice or its “renewal from the margins,”<sup>7</sup> but as itself a meaningful and constitutive embodiment of democratic principles offering lessons to anyone interested in “democracy,” so too should Chinese experience come to be seen as embodying more widely generalizable insight.

This volume therefore seeks to explore the conditions under which knowledge might become applicable to other contexts beyond those that produced it. The implications of this shift is diverse, and extend into a

wide variety of established disciplines. In this volume contributors examine some of the consequences for research in anthropology, philosophy, history, sociology, political theory, and economics, but their analyses are careful to consider the ways in which Chinese thought may offer alternative, disciplinary homes to shelter new ways of thinking. Appropriately, despite the diversity of their approaches, each of the chapters speaks in some way to the problem of knowledge: where (and when) it might be found, who can (and should) produce it, and how we might make claims about its content or adequacy.

The chapters also share a unique self-reflexivity, which is made possible by their willingness to *produce* theory in the act of *exploring* it. That is, in performing political, social, and economic theory much as its subjects do—by applying resources of diverse origins to discipline knowledge in the present—each chapter implicitly asks how we might learn from intellectual heritages that track local concerns even as they promise wider applicability. In confronting the question of knowledge in a double way—that is, not simply from the perspective of the writer and reader, but also from the perspective of the subject of analysis—these essays resist situating “the Chinese” as object and “we researchers” as subjects of knowledge. Instead, the process of moving between the contexts that inflect their knowledge and those that inflect ours is necessarily dialectical and mutually productive, blurring lines between self-other, internal-external, and researcher-researched.

To succeed in this task, we must confront the question of how, if social practices are constituted in part by what people think, say, and believe about them,<sup>8</sup> these discourses of self-understanding can nevertheless move from one community to another—without claiming that such moves are underwritten by scientific neutrality, normative universality, or some historically essentialist core of meaning. How might we move through, rather than back from, the post-Wittgensteinian grounding of all philosophy and thought in specific communities of argument, practice, and belief (in short, the dependency of philosophy on “culture”)? Answering these questions requires a new way of looking both at “China” and at “theory,” and how those revised terms can support the ground-clearing efforts of this volume.

### On “Theory”

As invoked in the social sciences and humanities, “theory” typically means a systematized body of thought, often identified with a particular lineage of thinkers or an ideological ism, such as Marxism or poststructuralism.<sup>9</sup> Here

I would like to develop and defend a broader notion of theory, defining it simply as a generalization in which conditions in one place or at one time, or both, are articulated in such a way to apply to other places or times. Put differently, theory is the deterritorialization of ideas to produce new and broader insight into social and political conditions elsewhere. To “theorize” thus means to reimagine diverse contexts, to visualize their similarities in ways that throw light on their differences, and vice versa. Marx was theorizing when he posed the term “capital” to capture specific continuities in otherwise disparate historical contexts, enabling him to argue for their underlying (and perhaps otherwise overlooked) similarities in modes of production. But Mao Zedong and his colleagues were also theorizing when they applied Marx’s concept of feudalism to Chinese economic history using an indigenous term (*fengjian*), and realized that the meaning of both *fengjian* and Marx’s feudalism required considerable revision before either could say something intelligible about the possibility for communism in China.<sup>10</sup>

As has been frequently noted, in the modern era theory has traveled almost exclusively in one direction: *from* European and American intellectual discourse—often metonymically referred to as “the West,” despite its geographic diffusion across the world—and *toward* the diverse experiences of Asians, Africans, Middle Easterners, and others, whose particularity at one point or another became subsumed within the hegemony of modern Western knowledge production. The influence of Eurocentric theory was enabled through European colonization and missionary work throughout the world, sustained by the economic, technological, and military power of the industrialized West. The challenge for contemporary scholarship, confronted directly by the contributors to this volume, is thus how to reverse the historical directional arrow. How might we enable—or, more trenchantly, *perform*—the movement of theory from China toward other regions of thought, including the modern West? These possibilities, I submit, are contained within the idea of theory itself.

### *The Pitfalls of Comparison*

In my definition here, theory is generated by the mobility of ideas across time and space, which draws attention to the ways in which contexts both transform and are transformed by its movement. On this basis, Lydia Liu and others have emphasized the importance of “translingual practice,” in which meanings are not so much transferred as invented as they move from place to place.<sup>11</sup> She is joined by others such as Naoki Sakai, who urge closer examination of the “excess” of translation and subsequent mutual

transformation that accompany the use of theory, rather than of the substance of any given theory itself.<sup>12</sup> This approach to the mobility of theory or meaning stems from a desire to rescue Chinese and other colonial or semicolonial societies from the imposition of Eurocentric categories, which hinders the ability to gain clarity about the particularities of China's struggle with modernity. Resisting the assumption that there exists some given, "correct" meaning for any particular theory or idea—where "correct" is often identified with how it has been interpreted within its original European or American context—this approach focuses on how reciprocity between languages becomes "thinkable."<sup>13</sup>

As Wang Hui explains:

From this perspective, words like "*gong*" [public], "*geren*" [individual], and "*kexue*" [science] and "*shehuizhuyi*" [socialism] are not transparent concepts. Moreover, they are not simple translations. There is a volatile relationship between these concepts and the life-worlds to which they refer: Firstly, by invoking a particular space, these concepts bestow meaning and order upon a previously unordered area of life. This also entails an evaluative tendency. Secondly, the relationship between concepts and the life-world involves more than naming. When "*gong*," "*geren*," "*shehuizhuyi*" and "*kexue*" and related concepts are constructed and enter into an historical context, these concepts themselves become part of the life-world and a most vibrant factor in the reproduction of social culture.<sup>14</sup>

In an article discussing these ideas, Viren Murthy makes the point that although "Wang objects to the use of Western categories because they have no relation to Chinese history," Wang himself uses equally freighted, modern terms such as "social structure," "discourse," and "context" to describe Ming and Qing China—a move that Murthy insists, contra Wang, is unavoidable and sometimes useful.<sup>15</sup> Roxanne Euben goes further to show that such dissonance signals *all* theorizing as "an inherently comparative enterprise, an often (but not inevitably) transformative mediation between familiar and unfamiliar and, by extension, between rootedness and critical distance."<sup>16</sup> For Euben, comparison is a necessary and omnipresent component of thinking about the world, and its worth lies not in how accurately it maps historical or material contexts but in how productively it enables reflection on and imagination of modes of life not one's own.<sup>17</sup> She argues that theory

is inherently comparative because it is in comparison with other ways of living, being, and constructing political collectivities that “we” are led to question the coherence and naturalness of our own. Such questioning simultaneously presupposes and enables a critical distance toward our own cultural practices and commitments. This distance is crucial to see the larger patterns and connections that inform our lives and to engage culturally unfamiliar perspectives without making them speak to and for us.<sup>18</sup>

Her understanding of comparison suggests the productive rather than reductive character of Liu’s “translingual practices.” To Euben, the disjunctures they mediate between what Liu calls host and target language are part of what makes theory possible. By showing that our knowledge is *always* comparative, Euben powerfully refutes the possibility that political theory can or should continue to ignore the ideas and experiences “supposedly beyond its purview.” Euben and other scholars in political theory and philosophy have pointed out that this move to include historically marginalized voices in ongoing disciplinary conversations does not contradict, but in fact fulfills, the mandate of theory (and its Greek predecessor, *theoria*) to explore the estranging and unfamiliar in search of new knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

The approach of this volume intersects with this general trend to think critically and self-reflexively about how engagement with historically marginalized or “non-Western” others can transform our own inquiry, particularly the generalizations we recognize as “theory.” But there are two discomfiting implications with seeing comparison alone as the defining goal of our scholarly efforts. The first is that, while comparison enhances our self-reflexivity by providing alternatives to the intellectual positions we assume, this engagement with unfamiliar perspectives need not acknowledge the possible validity, for “us,” of their claims to knowledge. In the passage cited above, Euben argues that the comparative mode of inquiry she describes avoids “making them speak to and for us.” In her view, we properly engage “culturally unfamiliar perspectives” when we question “the coherence and naturalness of our own” ways of doing things.

The second implication follows from the first. Comparison often inscribes an us/them boundary by valuing those perspectives for their help in questioning “*our own* cultural practices and commitments,” and in seeing the “larger patterns and connections that inform *our* lives” (emphasis mine). The others of which Euben speaks in the passage above are, that is, instruments to ends within what “we” take to be theory. It is true that their perspectives provide windows into our understanding of them, and

these engagements raise critical questions about “who may be recognized as theorizing, in what locales, and in which genres.”<sup>20</sup> But to remain confined to comparison is to occupy a position distinct from that of the thinkers we research.<sup>21</sup> Liu typifies such a distance when she does not explain why, if her own incorporation of theories from a wide range of languages and disciplines into the idiom of contemporary Anglophone academic historical writing is to be taken seriously as a contribution to knowledge, efforts by her Chinese subjects to do much the same thing are reduced to historicized processes of “translingual practice,” whose authenticity or viability is “beside the point.”<sup>22</sup> Their self-knowledge and critical reflections remain the *object* of her study, rather than constitutive parts of the “theory” she produces.

As a result of moves such as these, the theoretical frameworks of most contemporary academic knowledge production are largely derived from Euro-American, and often Anglophone, scholarship. As Margaret Hillenbrand notes,

It is the ‘old masters’ of Western theory [such as Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, and Benedict Anderson] who continue to describe the broad contours and grant features of the intellectual landscape, and whose influence is writ large all over the canvas. Indeed, many of the basic terms of reckoning and address which frame the study of contemporary East Asian culture—keywords like power, metropolis, postmodernism, nation—are routinely glossed via reference, and thus deference, to their Euro-American ‘originals.’<sup>23</sup>

There are a few important exceptions to this characterization.<sup>24</sup> But they remain at the contested fringes of disciplines whose terms they necessarily call into question, and often lack clear spaces of articulation.

### *Theory and Its Contexts*

These underwhelming outcomes are often said to reflect the difficulties of accessing worlds of knowledge situated differently from our own: the very embeddedness of humans in richly textured worlds of language and meaning implies that our grasp of the work of cultural others is always partial, inflected by our own existing worldviews. This is troublesome for the movement of theory because, as Charles Taylor has noted, social theories are “not about an independent object, but one that is partly constituted by self-understanding.”<sup>25</sup> In order to grasp the social theories of others, we

would have to understand the modes of life that in part constitute them by embodying the intentions and meanings of their practitioners. Otherwise, we would be explaining their ways of life in terms of what they mean to *us*, not to *them*.<sup>26</sup> Assuming that we cannot grasp these culturally situated modes of life, Taylor and many others recommend a comparative perspective through which our own ways of life come to be perspicaciously resituated vis-à-vis those of others.<sup>27</sup> In Fred Dallmayr's words, this mode of "dialogic comparison" is uniquely suited to the task of cross-cultural understanding, as it "does not pretend to possess a fulcrum outside time and space and above any other philosophy, but rather involves continuous border crossing and negotiation of boundaries."<sup>28</sup> Cross-cultural engagement is figured as a hermeneutic enterprise which enhances self-reflexivity in the process of acknowledging difference, rather than an affirmation of differently situated thought as a basis for generalizable knowledge production per se.

I would like to suggest that such justifications tend to overstate the uniqueness of the challenge posed by cultural differences to our existing understanding, as well as of the degree to which knowledge is embedded in its local cultures of circulation. As a result, they tend to understate the degree to which our inquiry may be shaped by the terms that cultural others propose. This is because the intractability of the background conditions against which and in which theorization takes place is not a feature unique to cross-cultural inquiry (such as when "Western" thinkers try to understand "Chinese" thought). If we accept that theories emerge in the process of applying local knowledge to conditions elsewhere, and vice versa, then the tensions of difference are *constituent*, and not merely incidental, features of theory-making itself.

It is certainly the case that theories emerge, as Taylor says, in and through practices specific to particular times and places. They articulate what it is we are doing, and make explicit the norms underlying given practices, in an attempt to clarify, criticize, and often transform local conditions.<sup>29</sup> But despite their ambitions to reflect the environment that their claims address, theories necessarily respond to dilemmas over whose broader contexts the theorist has little traction. As Hannah Arendt explains it, it is not the actor's original intention but the diverse responses by many interpreters that ultimately executes, and gives meaning to, any action.<sup>30</sup> Correspondingly, many scholars have criticized theory for *imposing* the order it claims to be discovering in the world. Hanna Pitkin, in particular, argues that theory tyrannically redraws the world in its own image, by refusing to negotiate the terms of its applicability to real people and their actions: "The theorist

stands outside the political system about which he speculates and writes; of necessity he deploys and manipulates its citizens without considering their wishes or opinions.”<sup>31</sup>

Pitkin urges theorists to politicize their claims, that is, enable ongoing, collective contestation of the terms they set out.<sup>32</sup> But her complaint also reveals another aspect of theory-making: if theories make claims about dynamic social and political worlds comprised of many actors, this suggests that contexts are necessarily *constructed*, not assumed, as theorists articulate the similarities and differences that ground the applicability of their theories. This construction of context occurs in at least two different ways. First, the point of any theory—say, about the definition of philosophy, the laws of economics, or the proper content of ritual—is to integrate the practices of otherwise disparate actors into some kind of coherent picture, so that some meaningful insight can be drawn about them as a category. Theories would not work unless they were posing some kind of similarity across difference, or some kind of difference across a perceived similarity. And differences like these exist as much *within* a perceived society as without it—hence Pitkin’s complaint that theorists, in making theory, inadequately account for the particularities and responses of the people that a theory deliberately homogenizes.

Second, theory-making always takes place in the present, even as it draws on historically and culturally situated resources that (again) are beyond the total control of the theorist herself. In the process of drawing on these resources, theories help to name the contexts and conversations in which they can be said to intervene. Alisdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor have read this process as one in which “traditions” of discourse are perpetuated.<sup>33</sup> Yet it can equally be said that the process interrogates (rather than assumes) the extent to which local and global contexts inflect the meaning and applicability of any given idea, discourse, or insight. Even if it is true that, as Taylor claims, “the explanatory sciences of society are logically and historically dependent on our self-definitions,”<sup>34</sup> nothing about this dependency prevents those outside of “our” self-definitions from taking up the “explanatory sciences” they shape. This possibility is amply demonstrated by the fact that the disciplinary standards of the modern social science and humanities have effectively displaced native categories of knowledge in most parts of the world.<sup>35</sup>

Such open possibilities about the multivalent relationship of present knowledge to events in the past and future are a recurring theme in this volume. Just as Chinese thinkers often contemplated the modes through

which sagely knowledge of past dynasties might be assured in present contexts as well as secured for the future, many of the chapters here consider how “Chinese” presents and pasts may bode certain kinds of futures for other societies. These possibilities turn on the realization that it is actually contradictory to confine the applicability of a theory to the specific social group in which it was originally formulated (even if, as is often the case, the theory played a role in constructing the social group it addresses, by naming its field of application). In political science, for example, some theories identify “democracy” as a political system in which people lose elections. But as this definition is applied to new practices in new arenas, by new actors with new motivations and aspirations, its original claims are challenged and refigured in unceasing processes of “translingual practice.” Democracy comes to be constantly renewed, but also critiqued; might its parameters expand to include Confucian *minben* ideals, in which the state cares for the people (*min*) who are seen as the foundation (*ben*) of society, or do these ideals structure a distinctly nondemocratic vision of authoritarian order? If the latter, might such an order still accord with democratic notions of legitimation?<sup>36</sup> Does this matter?

The differences that theories may capture as similarities (and vice versa) may also serve as points of rupture or targets of interrogation. The “legitimacy of Chinese philosophy” debate is one example of how a theory about what “philosophy” is and how it should be practiced can be both generalized to new contexts, as well as resisted on the basis of alternative views of knowledge. The debate, which began in mainland China during the early 2000s, turns on how well “philosophy,” understood as a contemporary academic discipline, functions to clarify what it is that traditional and contemporary Chinese thinkers are doing when they produce “thought” (*sixiang*). Does the practice of academic philosophy simply need to be expanded to include Chinese thought, as Chen Lai has argued, or might the existence of alternative Chinese modes of knowing foundationally threaten its disciplinary integrity, as Wei Changbo has claimed?<sup>37</sup> In this debate as elsewhere, the applicability of any given set of intellectual resources are underwritten not by the cultures in which theorists find themselves, but by comparative judgments that construct equivalences and differences between contexts that may span space and time. The question of whether Chinese thought is “philosophy” turns not on the ethnic identity of its producers, or on which cultural milieu they claim as their own, but rather on a disagreement about the extent to which such thought bears similarity to what is recognized as philosophy.

Often comparative judgments like these *do* work to shore up perceived cultural boundaries, by posing connections between otherwise histori-

cally and socially disparate groups. Ancient Athenian political philosophy is assumed to have immediate and transparent relevance to all contemporary “Westerners,” regardless of their own diverse cultures and experiences; and in much the same way, ancient texts written in diverse scripts and excavated in diverse locales throughout what is now China are often presumed to have immediate relevance to contemporary Asians, who inhabit a vast region of enormous cultural, religious, and historical complexity. These continuities are often presented as self-evident and historically continuous, part of the “tradition” in which some we-group is rooted, and through which that group articulates its most serious questions.<sup>38</sup> As Chris Goto-Jones has noted, however, such traditions are never self-evident givens. They rely on ceaseless work by self-identified participants to continually exclude or include particular areas of thought along what Goto-Jones calls their “central disciplinary highway.” These exclusions are often political rather than intellectual; in the case of Western political thought, for example, Goto-Jones identifies an ongoing resistance by participants to include non-Western thought, contradicting the “aspirant universalism” behind their claims to provide generally applicable scholarship that confronts the present’s most pressing questions.<sup>39</sup>

“Theory” thus refers not to some specific body of texts or ideologies, but to deterritorialized claims sustained by comparative judgments, which pose equivalences and differences between temporal, cultural, spatial, or other perceived contexts. Theory is not reducible to comparative judgments, however, because even these must be grounded in particular communities of argument, whose discursive standards generate particular claims, and render them valid and intelligible. This definition does not mean to impose a unity on each chapter’s invocation of “theory,” so much as to draw attention to theory’s contexts and consequences. The most important of these contexts are the Chinese (or Sinophone) communities of argument, whose discourses generate insights and support modes of reflection in each of the chapters to follow, but which historically have been overlooked in social and political theory. But first, we must first respond to concerns that in posing “Chinese” theory we are both shoring up a problematic ethnic category and mimicking the very discourse of “Western theory” we hope to disturb.

### On “China” and “Chinese”

Recent scholarship has persuasively deconstructed prefigured and monolithic notions of Chinese-ness, urging greater attention both to the internal complexities of Chinese thought and practice, as well as to the ethnic

heterogeneity that claims to a unified Chinese civilization often obscure.<sup>40</sup> These considerations can also be extended to the larger signifier of “Asia,” into which China is often drawn. In a recent article, Shu-mei Shih reminds scholars to work against the Asia versus Western binary, and not only for the well-known consequence that the binary marks the “West” as a category of undifferentiated yet authoritative general knowledge and “Asia” as a category of particular knowledge. Shih argues that the binary further distances Asia from “the domain of theory,” by willfully forgetting the “historical crossings that necessarily constituted the formation of what we call theory today.”<sup>41</sup> In China, in particular, it reproduces an “imperial subconscious,” which effaces its own suppression of difference, obscuring in particular the diverse (non-Han) multiethnicism that historically characterized the Qing empire.<sup>42</sup> A typical response to these dilemmas has been to interrogate the conditions under which claims to identity, whether presenting themselves as “Western,” “Asian,” “Chinese,” or anything else, come to circulate and have meaning for particular people at particular times. Emphasizing the hybrid character of all thought does important work in pointing out the process-based character of all identity: identities (or cultures or civilizations) are never unified, but constantly in the process of fracturing, blending, and (re)becoming as they respond to ongoing contact with different modes of living and thinking. As Homi Bhabha argues, identities are simply not there in any primordial sense, nor do they reflect a unitary or homogenous political object. Rather, “the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One . . . nor the Other . . . but something else besides*, which contests the terms and categories of both.”<sup>43</sup> Hybridity theories help to show, for example, that claims to universal reason which justified European imperial projects are not self-evident and self-sufficient truths, but historically situated claims that gain diverse meanings from oppositional contrasts to the practices of non-European peoples.<sup>44</sup>

In contesting Enlightenment claims to a unified reason and identity, hybridity valorizes particular local experience as a site of theory-making. It thereby offers an important tool for those scholars, including ourselves, who hope to draw attention to the ways in which Europeanized knowledge continues to occlude the theoretical autonomy of non-Westerners. Some of this work has been marshaled in the service of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called “provincializing Europe,” which seeks to reveal how Western claims to knowledge efface the particularity of certain subordinate social groups. But rather than discard Western thought, Chakrabarty urges scholars to see it now as “everybody’s heritage,” and to find ways it can be “renewed from and for the margins.” As Chakrabarty explains, “The point is not to reject

social science categories but to release into the space occupied by particular Euro histories sedimented in them other normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices and their archives.”<sup>45</sup>

In work that predated Chakrabarty's by fifty years, Takeuchi Yoshimi similarly called for “the Orient . . . to change the West in order to further elevate those universal values that the West itself has produced,” such that these values become “possible as method, that is to say, as the process of the subject's self-formation.”<sup>46</sup> Takeuchi joined other critics of modernity, slowly emerging in East Asia at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, who thought creatively about how an idea of “Asia” could offer a novel counterpoint to Western notions of progress and enlightenment. Like Chakrabarty and Takeuchi, however, these critical voices often saw in Asia not a repository of unique alternatives but a position from which to rethink the “West,” whose terms continued to form the core of meaningful thought. Du Yaquan, editor of the *Eastern Miscellany*, one of the most influential Chinese publications in the first half of the twentieth century, is a case in point. In a 1916 essay, he powerfully refutes claims that Asia lags behind the West, arguing instead that the two civilizations were different in kind rather than in level of development. As such, the “passive” (*jing*) East had much to offer the “active” (*dong*) West, whose weaknesses as an aggressive, individualistic, and competitive civilization became increasingly apparent during the First World War.<sup>47</sup>

These approaches are important steps toward recognizing Asia as a site of generalizable knowledge—that is, knowledge potentially applicable not only to people identified (or identifying) as Asians but to anyone else as well. But using Asian thought and experience to mark fissures or failures of Western knowledge carries a dual, and mutually paradoxical, threat, which may hinder the validation of Asian theory: either it poses a false and possibly essentialist homogeneity for “Asian” (and, by extension, “Chinese” thought); or it fragments the coherence that sustains meaningful intellectual development. Du and his contemporaries across East and South Asia often edged close to the first kind of threat, in their search for a set of values to counteract what they saw as the excesses of Western materialism. Laying claim, as they did, to unique “Asian” values or civilization does clear space for the assertion of global difference. But in posing alternatives to hegemonic categories, it ends up enforcing some of its own. “Asian Values” discourse of the 1990s offers a well-known example of how a term originally posed as a source of critique can become a badge of orthodoxy and intolerance. Lee Kwan Yew and Mahathir Mohamed are only the most well-known to claim that “Asian societies are unlike Western ones,” in that they value family rela-

tionships and economic development over democracy and human rights.<sup>48</sup>

The stark binaries invoked in these statements led scholars such as Amartya Sen to issue reminders of the enormous intellectual, cultural, and political diversity encompassed by the term “Asia.”<sup>49</sup> Sen joins Bhabha and others in pointing out how the hybrid character of thought and experience counteracts hegemonic discourses of identity. At the same time, however, this hybridity discourse broaches the second kind of threat, in that it hinders recognition of the internally self-referential and often long-standing discourses of reflection produced by these very non-Europeans. This is not only for the obvious consequence that claims to valorize “Chinese” thought risk accusations of being essentialist, hypernationalist, or otherwise untenable given the historical and cultural diversity of thought in the region. Hybridity also justifies a paradoxically insular perspective in which European thought, now seen as at least partially constituted by engagements with its cultural others, can be construed as sufficiently “globalized,” so as to warrant little or no investigation of the actual thought of those others. The contributions of non-Europeans to global thought and history can be affirmed, even as the theoretical richness of intellectual life outside of Europe or the United States is ignored as a subject of scholarship. Scholars influenced by hybridity and related ideas typically undertake something like what Talal Asad calls a “historical anthropology that takes the cultural hegemony of the West as its object of inquiry,”<sup>50</sup> or an exploration of how a term like “Chinese” becomes reevaluated in “the catachrestic modes of its signification.”<sup>51</sup> They attend to the processes by which such identities come to be articulated and supported, rather than to the potential theoretical substance of the claims themselves.

Is it possible to recognize Chinese thought as a coherent site of theory-production, without at the same time assuming some essentialist core that verifies its Chineseness? One possibility may be to consider what Yu Ying-shih, referring to Chinese intellectual history, called its “inner logic” (*nei zai li lu*).<sup>52</sup> Citing the inadequacy of typical theories used to explain the transition from neo-Confucian *lixue* (“study of principle”) in the Ming dynasty to the text-critical methods of the *kaozheng* (“empirical research”) school, Yu suggests that we look to the intellectual self-understandings of the participants themselves. Participants did not see the two intellectual approaches that respectively characterized each dynasty and were mutually opposed, but rather saw two different means to the same end. Qing dynasty scholars themselves often viewed their dynastic intellectual heritage as continuous with, and in some ways more efficaciously serving, the basic aims of Ming dynasty neo-Confucianism.<sup>53</sup> This self-understanding explains the

turn to *kaozheng* in more illuminating ways than do post-facto (or what Yu calls “external”) explanations that ascribe the shift to a fear of censorship by Manchu rulers, or to the growth of an emergent bourgeois sensibility.

Yu’s point, I think, is not that a discourse like that which spanned the Ming-Qing transition is impermeable, or even that its terms of art are self-sufficient. He takes particular pains to emphasize that his internal explanation is only one among many that can and should be used to explain why Qing intellectual history eventually developed the way that it did.<sup>54</sup> But Yu does draw attention to how discourses are shaped and constituted by historical, social, institutional, discursive, and other linkages, which bind together a community of knowledge in such a way as to sustain, over time, particular modes of systematic reflection over others. These linkages transmit and refigure the logic by which particular communities see certain ideas as intelligible and relevant, and others as inconsequential. They also regulate, through historically specific modes of power and influence, the degree to which individuals can be said to contribute to the discussions of that community, and how their contributions will resonate within its existing practices. In this volume, Wu Guanjun’s chapter suggests ways in which, in the mainland Chinese case at least, understanding of the Chinese community is often manifest in the sign of the nation-state. This “locality” is thus not only cultural, but also political and temporal: it extends across time and cuts through generations in the form of what Tim Cheek in his chapter calls “burning questions that confront different generations” in different ways.<sup>55</sup>

Given these considerations, the idea of “Chinese theory” at work here should be understood not as a hermetically sealed, internally homogenous entity. Rather, it marks a set of historically variegated, deeply hybridized yet often internally self-referential discourses and experiences, which can produce and discipline generalizations that apply across time and space. It is important to emphasize here that “Chinese theory” in its broadest sense is not sited only in Sinophone discourses. It may also include examination of experiences and historical events to formulate new explanations for conditions in Chinese economic, political, and social worlds, particularly those that lie outside the predictions of mainstream social science. In a seminal article, Philip Huang saw here the opportunity of asserting the “theoretical autonomy” of Chinese studies, in which we “break free of the conceptual constraints of the past and . . . join in the common search for new theoretical concepts” based on microsocial analyses of Chinese experience.<sup>56</sup> These new concepts can, in turn, be felicitously applied to other contexts, including late modern Euro-America. Generating “Chinese theory” therefore means to enlarge and apply Chinese thought and experience in ways that

are both unprecedented for, yet meaningfully continuous with, the specific contexts of their emergence. However, consonant with the discussion of “theory” above, the wider purchase of these theories cannot be assumed a priori; they are always sustained by comparative judgments, which themselves help to frame the contexts in which those claims apply.

Contributors to this volume offer examples of all these modes of producing Chinese theory. Some chapters (particularly those of Nakajima, Villagran and Brown, Jenco, and Cheek) examine historically situated Sinophone discourses in depth, to articulate ideas that can offer, and sometimes have already offered, more general insight into social and political life. Other chapters, such as that of Dowdle, use emerging Chinese economic and political realities to map a new global future on the basis of Chinese models. Still others (including Davies, Li, and Wu) tack between the discourses that mediate Chinese intellectual experience, on the one hand, and the events or conditions that make such knowledge production possible, on the other. Despite this diversity, all of these chapters share a commitment to showcase the possibility of Chinese thought and experience as more than a mere case study. They also encourage reflection on the ways in which academic knowledge-production itself—not only in terms of our subjects and terms of study, but also the attitudes we bring to that study—may itself be enriched and transformed by the Chinese theories explored in this volume. This includes bringing into focus both the difficulty and irony of experimenting with ways of thinking in Chinese while doing so in English (a point nicely thematized by Davies’s chapter). We intervene in Eurocentric Anglophone discourse even as we explore alternatives to it; we highlight the marginalized features of Sinophone discourse that have been systematically excluded from contemporary academic knowledge production, even as our very use of those discourses undoes clear binaries between “Chinese” and “Western” ideas. Each chapter works from Chinese perspectives—taking into account a wide range of primary and secondary material in Chinese, produced for both academic and popular audiences—to reflect on these adventurous possibilities for the location of knowledge, its conditions of production, and the modes through which its content or adequacy is legitimated, challenged, and sustained.

The volume is divided into two parts. The chapters in part I, “Chinese Theory and the Conditions of Knowledge,” explore Chinese ideas *about* knowledge to reflect on the conditions under which it may enjoy more general applicability, including how and where such knowledge may meaningfully circulate. These insights are extended in part II, “Chinese Thought across Time and Space,” which demonstrates the ways in which Chinese

thought and experience offer the same kind of predictive and culturally autonomous insight we derive from Euro-American sources.

## Chapter Summaries

In chapter 1, “Knowing How to Be: The Dangers of Putting (Chinese) Thought into Action,” Gloria Davies self-reflexively considers the task of theory-making from a Chinese perspective. In doing so, she helps to frame subsequent chapters’ explorations of the emotional regimes and substantive relationships that mark Chinese theories of knowing. Davies asks how Chinese thought (*sixiang*) might be generalized as theory, while retaining its identity as a form of inquiry characteristically harnessed to a moral and pedagogical resolve. According to Davies, academics in the Euro-American world generally tend to advance intellectual inquiry which, in a post-Enlightenment spirit, “relies on tools for reasoning that are designed to make conceptual analysis ever more precise.”<sup>57</sup> In contrast, *sixiang* constitutes not so much a technique of knowledge as a “redemptive disposition” that “expects knowledge to deliver a good.”<sup>58</sup> This long-standing disposition in Chinese critical inquiry constructs particular relationships to the past in the form of what Davies calls a “poetics of history,” which accords special importance to the concrete achievements of historical exemplars so as to provide redemptive moral instruction to thinkers in the present.<sup>59</sup> The chapter argues that if we wish to affirm Chinese thought as “global theory,” we would need to broaden the very idea of theory to include the moral insights to which Chinese thought aspires—which frequently take it toward questions of *how to be* as opposed to the Western philosophical preoccupation with *what is*. Davies warns us that our very attitudes toward knowledge, and “our” past, must change as we come to “think of our acts of intellectual discrimination as reflective of our personal conduct.”<sup>60</sup>

What, then, are the implications for using Chinese thought as theory, given that it often endows knowing with a moral purpose? The next two chapters consider ways in which the emotive commitments of Chinese knowledge may actually resolve tensions within contemporary philosophy. Paralleling the connection between emotion and morality limned by Davies, in chapter 2, “Grounding Normativity in Ritual: A Rereading of Confucian Texts,” Takahiro Nakajima examines theories of ritual in classical and medieval Chinese discussions to show how their emotionally regulatory capacities offer alternative groundings for normativity. Analytic philosophy

has long struggled to locate the foundations of normativity in the structure of human consciousness, but has so far failed to do so without appealing to transcendence. Nakajima argues, however, that Confucian philosophers, particularly Xunzi, articulate an alternative, and potentially successful, form of normativity through the performance of rituals, which they understand as grounded in the natural affections of human beings. Ritual, which Nakajima argues can be understood as socially emergent customs rather than sage-derived rules, transforms natural affections by extending them outward to other beings, including animals; as such, it avoids reference to a universal principle of the good in favor of other-oriented emotional practice.

Timothy Cheek shows how these creative preoccupations with emotion as a basis for normative and political knowledge recur in twentieth-century Chinese political theory. In chapter 3, “Attitudes in Action: Maoism as Emotional Political Theory,” Cheek draws from Mao Zedong’s rereading of Marxist-Leninism to show that emotion has long been theorized as integral to proper modes of knowing and being in Chinese contexts. In Maoism, thought is conceived not only as information, but as a form of proper practice, brought into being through correct “cognitive-affective dispositions” (*taidu*) that are conceived as both the mechanism and embodiment of human agency. *Taidu* theory, Cheek argues, provides a vocabulary for deconstructing habitual, reactive, or unreflective action, but more importantly posits an explanatory mechanism for change in cognitive activities. It therefore usefully addresses the question of normative and motivational forces in political life. Where much political theory of emotions has focused on how feelings may influence cognitive judgment and deliberation, *taidu* also prescribes a method for political *action* in the form of a pedagogy of self-transformation.

As these chapters suggest, the tight relationship between cultivated emotion and correct action in both historical and contemporary Chinese thought offers important insights, but nevertheless is not without its tensions. Chapter 4, the final chapter in this section, “A (Psycho)Analysis of China’s New Nationalism,” examines the consequences of those emotional configurations in the production of contemporary Chinese nationalist sentiment. Drawing on both internal self-analyses and external evaluations of popular and intellectual nationalism in the PRC, Wu Guanjun shows how these discourses embody fears of both cultural others, such as the “West,” and historical and future uncertainty about the place of China in a larger world. This chapter offers a useful close analysis of the ways in which mainland Chinese intellectuals in particular debate both the boundaries of space (national territory) and time (the global future), on the one hand, as well as China’s role in constructing and inhabiting those spheres, on the other.

In doing so, it illuminates the internal debates that contest the boundaries of Chinese identity (prominently though not exclusively associated with nationalism), and which regulate the promotion of “Chinese” models and ideas elsewhere.

Building from the theoretical possibilities articulated in part I, the chapters in part II, “Chinese Thought across Time and Space,” show that not only do Chinese pasts offer insight into the Chinese present, but contemporary trends in mainland China may herald the economic and legal future in other parts of the globalizing world, including Europe and the Americas. These possibilities are anchored in Chinese theories of knowledge mobility examined in chapter 5, “New Communities for New Knowledge: Theorizing the Movement of Ideas across Space.” In that chapter, Leigh Jenco draws on the work of two seminal thinkers of modern China, Liang Qichao and Yan Fu, to theorize the transportability of new ideas into geographically and culturally distant communities (what Liang and Yan call *qun*). Their approach contrasts with many recent critiques of ethnocentric knowledge production, such as those of Charles Taylor, where communities mark the contextual limitations to the application of knowledge generated elsewhere. Yan and Liang rather ask a more political question: How might communities be created or transformed to broaden the circulation and application of knowledge? Practically, the two thinkers built study societies and local parliaments to enact the communities demanded by Western forms of governance; theoretically, they advanced a specialized “study of communities” (*qunxue*), which offers both example and theory of how the community-based character of knowledge can expand rather than limit the contexts in which knowledge is meaningful.

In suggesting *qunxue* as an explanation of how knowledge moves across communities, Liang and Yan indicate the metatheoretical capacity of Chinese thought—that is, its capacity to think creatively about how theories themselves may interact, evolve, and have an effect on the world. Chapter 6 continues this exploration from a Confucian perspective, while offering further reflection on the connection between knowledge and emotive commitment raised in part I. In “The Evolution and Identity of Confucianism: The Precedence Principle in Reforming Tradition,” Chenyang Li explores a Confucian approach to understanding the underlying historical identity of a shared set of practices and thought. In a demonstration of simultaneously thinking both about and within what he calls the “Confucian cultural community,” Li argues that the idea of precedence (*xu*) as theorized by a wide range of Confucian thinkers, such as Han Yu and Zhu Xi, can help to validate future evolutions of the tradition, without at the same time ascrib-

ing to it a core set of essentialist features. He draws on a broad range of comparisons, including Chan (Zen) Buddhism and contemporary Western hermeneutic philosophy, to show that the means to preserve the *dao* (or “way”) of any given cultural tradition may be to allow that *dao* to change in response to future challenges, but only in ways that can be justified to a community of believers as having precedent.

In chapter 7, “Being in Time: What Medieval Chinese Theorists can Teach Us about Causation,” Ignacio Villagran and Miranda Brown join Li in considering how Chinese theorizations of temporality and historicity may resolve problematic impasses within contemporary social science and the humanities, by examining a series of thinkers from the Tang dynasty. Whereas many current critics of positivist methods in sociology and history have pointed out the problems with assuming the causal uniformity of human events, they have failed to provide a clear alternative that can both remain true to human particularity and yet recognize trans-historical patterns. Brown and Villagran show, however, that Tang dynasty debates over state centralization theorized a range of methods for understanding the past in the present, which neither turned on assumptions of uniform causality nor collapsed into fragmentary specificity. Rather, these thinkers—including the well-known poet Liu Zongyuan—“understood time as an uneven patchwork of temporal registers,” which nevertheless could evince meaningful patterns across human contingency.<sup>61</sup>

These chapters explore Chinese textual resources and lived experience to consider how the past of some communities may offer keys to the situation of those of us in the present. In the last chapter, “China’s Present as the World’s Future: China and ‘Rule of Law’ in a Post-Fordist World,” Michael Dowdle also considers how contemporary trends in China may herald the future for other societies around the globe. Many legal and economic commentators have denigrated China as a “developmental laggard” for its inability to develop rule of law, constitutional strength, and economic regulatory capacity. Dowdle, however, argues that the very terms of these criticisms turn on what may now be an outdated view of legal, institutional, and economic development. This view incorrectly characterizes China as behind the rest of the world, when in reality it may be *ahead* of it. Using emerging insights from Chinese “New Left” discourse, Dowdle suggests how global economic development can be theorized in new ways, taking China’s “post-Fordist” economic model as the central example of where the rest of the world may be heading.

Taken collectively, the chapters in this volume encourage us as researchers to think about what we can do, and what we are already doing, to acti-