

Guest Editor's Introduction

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The idea for this special issue originated in late 2008. In early November of that year, I was invited to participate in the inaugural conference of the Tsinghua Academy of National Learning, where I delivered the paper that leads this special issue. At the request of friends in Hong Kong, following that conference I delivered the same paper at the School of English at Hong Kong University and the Humanities Program at Hong Kong Baptist University. It was in the aftermath of that meeting that I decided to go ahead with a special issue to discuss the question in its multiple facets. The editorial board of *China Perspectives* agreed that it was a timely and important question. The result is this special issue.

Guoxue as idea and intellectual pursuit has a history in China of slightly over a hundred years. Throughout, it has been entangled with efforts to construct (or what amounts to the same thing, search for) a past that would bolster claims to a uniquely Chinese national identity. Its a-historical essentialist approach to national cultural and scholarly legacy has invited much criticism in China and abroad, especially among those suspicious of the past as a hindrance to creating a modern nation. It has also assumed greater variety and complexity over the years in response to such criticism, conflicting conceptualisations of the national past, and China's changing relationship to its global context.

The present context is marked by two important characteristics where *guoxue* is concerned. First, for the first time in the last two centuries, economic and political success has transformed China's relationship to the world, reinforcing confidence in national identity and with it, pride in a past that had been degraded by liberals and repudiated by revolutionaries. Secondly, cultural claims against Eurocentrism globally, including in the very homelands of Euro/America, has opened the gates to the resurgence of cultural legacies that had been cast aside under the regime of Euro-modernity. They have acquired renewed impetus from success in the global capitalist economy. The result is what I have described elsewhere as "global modernity," a new phase in the unfolding of modernity marked by the globalisation of capital, its multi-centring (so far), and a cultural fragmentation corresponding to the redistribution of economic and political power. In the case of Chinese and East Asian societies, a cultural reassertion may be dated back to the late 1970s in the so-called "neo-Confucian" societies of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. It reached the People's Republic of China in the mid-1980s in the midst of retreat from revolution, gathering strength from the mid-1990s in tandem with rapid economic development, the emergence of a new academic class of intellectuals, cultural participation in Eastern Asia, and a determination to assert a Chinese cultural presence in the emerging world order. *Guoxue* in its most recent incarnation was a product of this situation (in the mid-1990s), the effects of which are visible in efforts to endow it with a contemporary identity.

The essays included in this connection make an effort to delineate the intellectual and institutional development of *guoxue* since it reappeared on the Chinese academic and intellectual scene in 1993 (with some official participation), offer glimpses into its historical development, analyse criti-

cally its cultural particularism against the universalistic goal that had driven nationalism in its more revolutionary manifestations, the political premises and motivations that underlie it, and what it may have to tell us about problems of modernity in China. The essays seek to capture, in however limited a way, the different facets of *guoxue*: a mode of scholarship, an epistemology, a textual tradition, a repository of native learning, a guardian of national spirit, an inquiry into a complicated past shaped by forces both local and global. At its most narrow, contemporary scholars of *guoxue* (and their popular constituencies) identify it with *ruxue*, or what is usually described somewhat misleadingly as "Confucianism," and Confucius with the spirit of the nation. At its broadest, *guoxue* may be comparable to nation-based studies elsewhere (e.g., American Studies, French Studies, etc.) that open it up as subject-matter not just to a complex past but also to global connections past and present (this is the professed goal): for example, the Tsinghua Academy of National Learning, which draws upon an earlier *guoxue* studies program at that university in the 1920s (see the Dirlik and Makeham essays below).

Though a predicament, the association of *guoxue* with Confucianism no doubt has a strong hold on the scholarly as well as the popular imagination. The insistence on Confucius as a symbol of national cultural identity serves more effectively both cultural political manipulation and popular desire. The new status of Kongzi at Tiananmen Square may serve domestic purposes that abroad are encapsulated in the so-called "Confucian Institutes," prominent for their part in cultural propaganda – now euphemistically called "soft power" – business networking, and the "hard" task of making the Chinese language visible globally. On the other hand, it also responds to a simplistic desire at a more popular level for a pure national identity that can be discovered in a few texts and an array of past worthies, most of them newly dressed in Confucian garb to demonstrate the essential homogeneity of China – and "Chinese" – everywhere. For outsiders looking in, apparently unimpressed by decades of cultural criticism, the same symbolic identification provides an easily graspable version of Chinese difference that satisfies the basically stereotyped notions of culture that multi-culturalism rightly or wrongly has legitimised.

It is possible that these pressures will drive *guoxue* more and more in a direction that will make it indistinguishable from *ruxue*. But that does not mean that *guoxue* intrinsically must follow such a course. The more historically (spatially as well as temporally) informed approach to *guoxue* also has a good likelihood for success in its very responsiveness to intellectual sources in its global context that makes "worlding" China (bringing China into the world, and the world into China) a primary goal of intellectual and academic activity. There is a "China-centrism" in the whole undertaking, to be sure, but it is a "China-centrism" that exists in the midst of a complex academic and intellectual setting of which Euro-modernity has been a formative force, and which then is already a constituent of a contemporary "China-centrism" that has its reference point outside of itself. It is a "China-centrism" that challenges the universalistic claims of Eurocentrism not to escape into parochialism, but to bring a Chinese presence into the

world. On the other hand, to escape ideology, historical mindedness also requires recognition of the tentativeness of centrism where the past is concerned, in other words, a critique of nationalist historiography. What we call China was itself constituted of many centres, and conceived as such late in history. A thoroughgoing historicism requires proponents of *guoxue* to account for their own historicity, their relationship to the revolution of which *guoxue* is in some ways a negation, the social and political relationships implied in their embrace of *guoxue*, and their relationship to global scholarship.

Guoxue understood in this latter sense is quite a legitimate undertaking, in my view, and is what provoked members of my audience on the occasion referred to above. Placing *guoxue* in a global context is of the utmost importance in this regard. For the more open-minded of its proponents, its goal is not to promote a nativism but rather to overcome the erasures of Euromodernity. Both a nativist and a historically-minded cosmopolitan *guoxue* parallel cultural trends of global scope that account for the many cultural contradictions of our day. Viewing them from a global rather than China-bound perspective reveals their affinity with global trends. The critique of nativist *guoxue* is very much necessary, as my interlocutors insisted. But recovery for the present of ways and systems of knowing, and the values they represented, that have been marginalised in Eurocentrism (or Sinocentrism) is another matter altogether, because the world as a whole may benefit from them.

The essays below address some of the issues raised by the contemporary *guoxue* revival. My own essay is an elaboration of the issues I have raised above. It traces the unfolding of *guoxue* over the last century, its immediate context in China, and the broader global trends with which it resonated. John Makeham, astute scholar of "Confucianism," examines in depth and breadth the contemporary development of *guoxue*, with particular emphasis on its relationship to *ru*xue. Chen Jiaming offers a brief outline from the perspective of a distinguished mainland philosophical scholar, and examines critically the interests involved in its promotion, its political and philosophical particularism, and, for the same reason, its obliviousness to contemporary values from democracy to human rights. Qingsheng Tong, specialist in English literature, brings the perspective of the literary historian to an analysis of *guoxue* historically, and to its preoccupation with language and its resonances with national studies in Europe. Xie Shaobo, also a literary historian and, like Qingsheng Tong, a specialist in English literature and concerned citizen, takes a closer look at some of the interests involved in the promotion of *guoxue*, its academic context, and what it might indicate concerning a Chinese uneasiness with modernity. The concluding essay by Liu Dong, a passionate advocate and institutional representative of *guoxue*, offers a genealogy of the different meanings attached to *guoxue* while also elaborating his own vision of its significance.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to all the contributors in the volume for their eager response to my invitation to participate.