

LIU ZEHUA 劉澤華 (1935–2018)

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Abstract

This obituary surveys the biography and major works of Liu Zehua, a leading scholar of China's intellectual history, political thought, and political culture. It explores the impact of Liu Zehua's personal experience, in particular the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution, on his conceptualization of Chinese political culture as subjugated to the overarching principle of monarchism. Liu Zehua's critical engagement with China's past distinguished him from proponents of revival of traditional values and made him one of the powerful opponents of cultural conservatives in China.

Professor Liu Zehua, who passed away at his daughter's house in Seattle on May 5, 2018, was a towering figure in China's intellectual circles. A widely acclaimed leader of what is dubbed the "Nankai Current," "Liu Zehua's Current," or, more recently, the "Ideology of Monarchism Current," he was an active participant in ideological battles waged in the field of China's intellectual history from the early 1970s. His opponents dubbed him "antitraditionalist," "cultural nihilist," and "Marxist" (which is no longer a laudatory term for many Chinese scholars). But even his fiercest critics could not deny his tremendous impact on the field of Chinese history in general and on studies of Chinese political thought and political culture in particular.¹

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This obituary incorporates and updates parts of my article "Liu Zehua and Studies of China's Monarchism," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 45.2–3 (2013–2014), 3–20.

1. For "Liu Zehua's current," see Li Zhenhong 李振宏, "Zhongguo sixiang shi yanjiu zhong de xuepai, huayu yu huayu" 中國思想史研究中的學派、話語與話域, *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊 11 (2010), 119–23. For singling out Liu Zehua as the most formidable opponent of China's self-proclaimed cultural conservatives, see Chen Ming 陳明, "Ruxue de xianshi yiyi yu lishi zuoyong lueshuo—Jian bo Liu Zehua suowei wangquanzhuyi xushi" 儒學的現實意義與歷史作用略說—兼駁劉澤華所謂王權主義敘事, *Xueshu jie* 學術界 6 (2008), 104–9.

Early Years

Liu Zehua considered his early career as a chain of lucky coincidences. His mother was the elder daughter of a poor peasant from Hebei, and as she had to take care of her younger siblings, she missed the upper limit of the marriage age, which was twenty at that time. When she became seriously ill, her father began urgently looking for a ghost bridegroom: an unmarried maiden was not allowed to be buried in the family's graveyard and had to be posthumously married off to the ghost of a lonely man with whom she would then be buried together. At that moment, a matchmaker appeared on behalf of an elderly widower from a neighboring village: thirty years her senior, he was looking for a new bride to replace his recently deceased spouse. The marriage proved highly successful: not only did the bride recover from her nearly mortal illness, but she also gave her husband five sons and a daughter (in addition to his four children from the previous wife). Liu Zehua, born in 1935, was the youngest son, the ninth in his family.

Although Liu Zehua's father was labeled by the Communists a "rich peasant," his wealth was relative, and it did not suffice to provide adequate education for his progeny. Zehua's elder brothers attended primary school for one or two years only, which was normal for the family, for most of its members had been illiterate for generations. Yet here destiny intervened: when a three-year-old Zehua was playing with his five-year-old elder brother, a physiognomist passed by them and predicted a bright future for both. Since the physiognomist left without asking for any payment, Zehua's father believed the prediction and urged his wife to take care of the children's education after his anticipated death. Thus, both children attended school and made successful careers: one as a renowned professor, the other as a high-ranking Party cadre.

The physiognomist's prediction in due time became a reality. In 1949, Liu Zehua successfully passed exams to enter a secondary school in Shijiazhuang, which by itself was a rarity for a rural student. Upon graduation in 1952, he was enrolled in the newly opened Russian language training courses in Tianjin, and a few years later started his studies in the Department of History at the prestigious Nankai University, Tianjin. Already in 1958 he was selected, unexpectedly for a young student, as an assistant teacher, and this position became permanent in 1961, shortly before his official graduation. His career as a professional historian had begun.

Liu Zehua joined the Communist Party in the early 1950s, and through the 1960s he remained, in his own words, a staunch "believer" in the Party and, of course, in Chairman Mao. He might well have joined the ranks of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution had he not been lucky enough to be sidelined because of his problematic "rich peasant"

background and because of complaints against him launched by more zealous activists. During the tumultuous years of 1966 to 1972, he was intermittently put on probation lists, struggled against, pardoned and allowed to join the “revolutionary masses,” sent to reeducation by labor, and again restored in his teaching assistant position in a crippled and badly battered Nankai University. Although his relatively insignificant position allowed him to avoid the worse fate of becoming either a major victim or a victimizer, the experiences of repeated upheavals were nonetheless bitter enough. It was then that Liu Zehua began contemplating the reasons for the ongoing madness and cruelty. Refusing to blame the “excesses” only on Mao Zedong and his henchmen, Liu began seeking deeper answers. This search eventually led him to investigate the impact of political power on Chinese society and culture, and the ideological roots of the ruler’s absolute authority. Like many intellectuals of his generation, Liu Zehua could consider the Cultural Revolution the formative period of his intellectual development.

Personal Courage and Scholarly Integrity

In 1972, following the fall of Lin Biao 林彪 (1907–1971), China witnessed a temporary ideological relaxation that allowed the renewal of academic publications.² It was then that Liu Zehua first entered inadvertently into a major ideological controversy. He had written an article on the First Emperor of Qin (秦始皇, r. 221–210 B.C.E.), in which he duly praised the emperor’s achievements, but also allowed a few critical remarks about the oppressive nature of the Qin government. The remarks were couched in the acceptable language of class struggle, and the article was approved by the Party branch in the university and was due to be published in the summer of 1973. Yet just when the issue of the *Nankai Academic Journal* had been printed, a new directive came: the First Emperor, with whom Mao openly identified himself, was no longer to be criticized. The frightened party secretary of the university ordered Liu to write a self-criticism and sent him back to the countryside temporarily to avoid further troubles, while all of the 8,000 issues of the journal were burned immediately. The article was eventually published in 1977, a year after Mao’s death, and Liu’s interest in the First Emperor brought about in due time further studies of this emperor’s role in China’s history, and especially his role in the elevation of China’s monarchs to the position of absolute supremacy (see below).

2. For this period, see Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Shoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 337–57.

In 1974, Liu Zehua became involved in a second, more overt controversy. In the summer, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing 江青 (1914–1991), and her supporters (the would-be “Gang of Four”) launched a full-scale anti-Confucian campaign. According to their interpretation of history, the struggle between “Confucians” and “Legalists” went back to the Springs-and-Autumns period (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 B.C.E.) and continued uninterruptedly thenceforth well into the age of the People's Republic, when it evolved into the “struggle between the two lines” in the Communist Party. To validate this idea, and to validate the position of the “Legalists” as eternally “progressive” fighters against “reactionary” Confucians, Jiang Qing called a large scholarly conference in Beijing in July, attended not just by scholars but also by most of the Party leaders, as well as representatives of “workers and peasants.” Liu Zehua was invited and presented his views, which differed sharply from the new Party line. He claimed that, first, both Legalists and Confucians represented different groups of exploiters, so their struggle should be analyzed as internal contradiction within the ruling classes rather than that between progressives and reactionaries; and, second, there was no evidence for any eternal struggle between the two. Actually, already by the Han 漢 dynasty (206/202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), the ideological controversy had subsided considerably and it disappeared from later periods. Liu's presentation manifested two features that remained the hallmark of his scholarship for the rest of his life: deep commitment to scholarly integrity and considerable personal courage. His views caused a sharp clash between him and one of Jiang Qing's major henchmen, Chi Qun 遲群 (1932–1983) from Qinghua University. Luckily, Liu was again spared persecution, but he had to silence himself until the end of Mao's era.³

In the aftermath of the downfall of the “Gang of Four” in October 1976, Liu Zehua emerged as one of the most prominent members of the younger generation of Chinese scholars. Like many fellow intellectuals he joined the struggle against the so-called “Whateverist” faction who tried to perpetuate the ideological foundations (if not the practices) of Mao's late years.⁴ Liu played an eminent role in the ideological counterattack against Maoist positions. His first polemical article, published

3. Liu Zehua's memories from that period have been published in his “‘Wenge’ zhong de jingen, cuowei yu zizhu yishi de mengsheng—yantaoshi de sixiang zishu zhi er” “文革”中的緊跟、錯位與自主意識的萌生——研討歷史的思想自述之二, *Shixue yuekan* 史學月刊 11 (2012), 97–101.

4. For an excellent depiction of that period and of the intellectuals' role in ensuring Deng Xiaoping's 鄧小平 restoration to power, see Roderick MacFarquhar, “The Succession to Mao and the End of Maoism, 1969–82,” in *The Politics of China, 1949–1989*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 248–339, on pp. 311–327.

in 1978 in *Historical Studies* (*Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究) not only rejected the “revolution in historiography” launched by the radicals back in 1966, but stepped further into the direction of ideological liberalization. Liu called for the suspension of “forbidden zones” in historical research, objective reassessment of Confucianism (which was still stigmatized as “reactionary thought”), and a general abandonment of the “deification” and “demonization” of historical personalities.⁵ His next major article called to downgrade the overall importance of the class struggle as the singular explanation of historical processes, refocusing instead on the concept of “productive forces.”⁶ In the third article, he put forward a balanced reassessment of the First Emperor, presenting him as a complex historical personality with manifold merits but also many faults and failures.⁷ Each of his articles contributed in its own way to the ongoing ideological thaw that matured in the 1980s, and gained Liu a position at the forefront of ideological battles of the time. In 1983, during the campaign “against spiritual pollution,” he was targeted again as “lacking fundamental understanding of Marxism,” but he was spared serious persecution.

In the 1980s, Liu Zehua was appointed as the chair of the History Department in Nankai University, which, under his leadership, became the best department of history among mainland universities. The peculiar position of Tianjin—close enough to Beijing to be involved in major political controversies at the capital, but also distant enough to avoid excessive censorship and political oppression—allowed the new chair to launch a few bold experiments, including China’s first ever course on the history of human rights (a concept that was just starting to emerge in the 1980s from the shadow of illegitimacy), and even a course on the history of the Cultural Revolution. Yet the thaw of the 1980s eventually came to an end with the mass student protest of 1989 and its subsequent brutal suppression. Liu Zehua, like a few other leading professors at Nankai University, joined the students’ protests in April and May of 1989, suspending classes and actively participating in some of the demonstrations. He did so somewhat reluctantly, realizing that the student movement went too far and would inevitably provoke harsh backlash, but also considering support of the students as his moral responsibility.

5. Liu Zehua, “Zasui jiasuo, jiefang shixue: ping ‘si ren bang’ de suowei ‘shixue geming’” 砸碎枷鎖，解放史學——評“四人幫”的所謂“史學革命”，*Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 8 (1978), 9–20.

6. Liu Zehua and Wang Liansheng 王連升, “Guanyu lishi fazhan de dongli wenti” 關於歷史發展的動力問題, *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu* 教學與研究 2 (1979), 26–33.

7. Liu Zehua and Wang Liansheng, “Lun Qin Shihuang de shifei gongguo” 論秦始皇的是非功過, *Lishi yanjiu* 2 (1979), 33–47.

The presence of a few leading and hugely popular professors among the student protesters in Tianjin proved an important factor in moderating the protests and preventing violent clashes and deaths in the city.

In the aftermath of the 1989 events, Liu Zehua was fired from his position as the Department's chair, but was otherwise spared. He suspended his Party activities, but continued ever more active involvement in scholarly work, deepening his analysis of the overarching power of Chinese monarchs and their impact on China's sociopolitical and intellectual trajectory. The spirit of political criticism that continued to permeate his articles in the 1990s distinguished them markedly from the common trend of increasing self-censorship and preference of "pure scholarship" over implicit or overt political engagement by scholars in humanistic disciplines. Actually, it was in the 1990s that his scholarly views matured and his position as the founder and undisputed leader of the "Nankai" or "Ideology of Monarchism" current was established.⁸

Ideology and the Practice of Monarchism

There is no doubt that Liu Zehua's scholarly interests were shaped to a considerable extent by his personal experiences. His quest to understand patterns of political behavior under Mao's dictatorship, particularly during the Cultural Revolution; his involvement with liberalizing tendencies of the 1970s and 1980s; his sympathy with the students' movement of 1989; his critical views of authoritarian trends in China's politics thereafter—all these may explain his preoccupation with the question of political power and its role in China's socioeconomic and intellectual history. Like many eminent historians in China, Liu Zehua "used the past to criticize the present." And yet, he remained foremost a historian deeply committed to facts and to analysis of the complexity of traditional Chinese sociopolitical and intellectual systems. He never attempted to adopt a mantle of political philosopher, and none of his publications were aimed at proposing recipes for alleviating China's current problems. While his studies did call for drawing certain historical lessons, these lessons could not be reduced to simplistic "do" or "do not" advice for the present. Liu neither glossed over the rupture with the past that occurred in the twentieth century nor necessarily lamented it. He was forever careful to avoid either adoration or demonization of China's millennia-old experience with a monarchic form of rule; rather,

8. The most systematic discussion of the "Ideology of Monarchism Current" (*wangquanzhuyi xuepai* 王權主義學派) is in Li Zhenhong, "Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang shi yanjiu zhong de wangquanzhuyi xuepai" 中國政治思想史研究中的王權主義學派, *Wen shi zhe* 文史哲 4 (2013), 5–28.

by raising the readers' awareness of the pitfalls of the traditional monarchic political system, his studies cautioned against perpetuating patterns of the monarchic past in the postmonarchic present.

Liu Zehua was a committed Marxist; but unlike many of his colleagues he was a critical-minded and creative utilizer of the Marxist theory in studies of Chinese history. Instead of engaging in futile debates about periodization of China's past according to Marx's "five stages" scheme, Liu focused on Marx's observation made in the context of analyzing French history: "the executive power controls society."⁹ Liu's adaptation of this view to Chinese history is summarized in the opening passage of his article "Monarchism: A Historical Orientation of Chinese Intellectual Culture": "I believe that the major peculiarity of traditional Chinese society was that the monarch's power controlled society."¹⁰

This phrase summarized more than a decade of explorations by Liu Zehua, which are presented in a book titled *Dictatorial Power and China's Society*, coauthored with Wang Maohe 汪茂和 and Wang Lanzhong 王藍仲.¹¹ The starting point of these explorations was a study of the formation of large landownership in pre-imperial China. Liu found that almost no known land transaction was based on the purchase of land; rather, land was grabbed, granted, or exchanged—but almost never purchased, at least not until the very end of the Warring States period (Zhangguo 戰國, 453–221 B.C.E.). It turns out that the earliest class of large landowners in China was created by political power. This ability of the ruling stratum to intervene in economic and social relations, especially but not exclusively through the reallocation of resources, remained one of China's major peculiarities for millennia to come. Whereas Liu and his collaborators were aware of the de facto limits to the state's economic interventionism under many dynasties, they pointed out that there were no institutional limitations to the state's power (e.g., there was no concept of inalienable private property of land), which allowed the ruling stratum to repeatedly reallocate land and other resources. Similarly, social hierarchy in China was primarily (and at times, exclusively) determined by the state, that is, once again by the ruling stratum. These socioeconomic foundations of China's monarchic system stand at the

9. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, part 7.

10. Liu Zehua, "Wangquanzhuyi: Zhongguo sixiang wenhua de lishi dingwei" 王權主義：中國思想文化的歷史定位, *Tianjin shehui kexue* 天津社會科學 3 (1998), 59–62; translated by Yuri Pines in *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 45.2–3 (2013–2014), 21–31.

11. Liu Zehua, Wang Maohe, and Wang Lanzhong, *Zhuanzhi quanli yu Zhongguo shehui* 專制權力與中國社會 (Changchun: Jilin wenshi, 1988; reprinted by Tianjin guji in 2005, with a new introduction by Liu Zehua).

background of this system's exceptional power in the realms of ideology and culture as well.

Study of the intellectual foundations of China's monarchic system became the main avenue of Liu Zehua's research from the early 1980s. Two points are characteristic of his exploration of the history of Chinese political thought. The first is the search for the "bottom line" in the ideas of competing thinkers. Liu noticed that, bitter disputes aside, almost all known thinkers remained fully committed to the principle of "monarchism" (王權主義, "the ideology of monarchic rule"). All these thinkers considered the ruler-centered polity as both normative and desirable; none ever posed an alternative. This understanding became pivotal for Liu's effort to reassess ideological trends in the Warring States (and later periods). It stood at the background of each of his analyses of manifold political models and views of the ruler–minister relations and of the role of the commoners versus the ruler in pre-imperial texts.

The second point is related to the first. It is Liu Zehua's emphasis on similarities rather than differences among the competing "Schools of Thought." Liu did not abandon the "school" definition altogether, but he applied it primarily for heuristic purposes. He remained resolutely opposed to the reification of the "schools" and turning them into a major analytical unit as is done in the overwhelming majority of publications in China and elsewhere. Hence, in some of his most notable monographs, especially *Reflections on Traditional Chinese Political Thought* (1987) and *Modes of Traditional Chinese Political Thought* (1991), Liu Zehua dispensed with "schools" altogether, analyzing ideas across the broad spectrum of received and unearthed texts.¹² This approach allowed him to highlight focal points of the Warring States period discourse and to explore commonalities and differences among thinkers concerning a broad variety of issues, such as views of Heaven, the Way, the Sage, concepts of the ruler, the minister, the people, approaches toward ritual, law, human nature, history, the state, the nature of social hierarchy, and so forth. The ability to escape the common pitfall of subordinating one's analysis to the "school" labels is surely one of the major strengths of Liu's studies.

Beneath Liu Zehua's exploration of the ideological foundations of monarchism in China lay another concern of his: the predicament of politically involved intellectuals. These intellectuals were both the staunchest promoters of the idea of monarchism, and the major victims of the monarchic system, which reached its peak after the imperial

12. Liu Zehua, *Zhongguo zhengzhi sixiang fansi* 中國政治思想反思 (Beijing: Sanlian, 1987); *Zhongguo chuantong zhengzhi siwei* 中國傳統政治思維 (Changchun: Jilin jiaoyu, 1991).

unification of 221 B.C.E. Why did pre-imperial thinkers, who enjoyed remarkable intellectual freedom, overwhelmingly chose to support the monarchic system in which they could not occupy the leading position? Why did the assertive and perspicacious imperial literati acquiesce to the position of servitors in the ruler-centered world? These questions were the center of many of Liu's publications, the most notable of which is the two-volume *Shi and Society*.¹³ In both volumes, Liu explored the position of the intellectually active members of the *shi* 士 ("men-of-service") stratum in pre-imperial and early imperial China. Like other scholars who deal with the history of *shi*, Liu Zehua lauded this stratum for its undeniable contribution to the formation of Chinese intellectual culture and to the development of the Chinese imperial polity, and he repeatedly hailed the intellectual courage of individual *shi*. However, he also pointed out the limits of their autonomy—their economic dependence on the rulers, and their overwhelming ideological commitment to the ruler-centered polity. In a later work, Liu discussed the endless frustration of the imperial *shi* in greater detail, concluding that their simultaneous commitment to the ruler-centered polity and to the Way (Dao), which should have placed them above the rulers, brought these literati into a kind of "psychosis" (*jingshen bing* 精神病).¹⁴ This harsh verdict obviously hinted at twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals as well, although the parallel was never explicitly articulated, for understandable reasons.

Since the 1990s, Liu Zehua's focus had shifted from socioeconomic and intellectual history per se toward the realm of political culture. It is by that time that his approach toward China's historical predicament crystallized in a series of major articles later assembled in his opus magnum, *China's Monarchism* (2000).¹⁵ In these publications, Liu went beyond specific ideas of pre-imperial thinkers that influenced the building of the empire, and explored their modes of thought, which exercised lasting influence on values, ideals, and behavioral patterns of major political actors throughout the imperial millennia. In particular, he focused on the interrelations among four pivotal terms of the political discourse: Heaven (*Tian* 天), the Way (*Dao* 道), the Sage

13. Liu Zehua, *Shiren yu shehui* 士人與社會; divided into *Xian Qin juan* 先秦卷 (co-authored with Liu Hongtao 劉洪濤) and *Qin Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao juan* 秦漢魏晉南北朝卷 (co-authored with Sun Liqun 孫立群 and Ma Liangkuan 馬亮寬) (both published in Tianjin: Tianjin renmin, 1988).

14. Liu Zehua, *Zhongguo de Wangquanzhuyi* 中國的王權主義 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin), 175–81.

15. Liu Zehua, *Zhongguo de Wangquanzhuyi*. Some of Liu Zehua's major articles were translated in the special issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 45.2–3 (2013–2014).

(*shengren* 聖人), and the Monarch (*wang* 王). Heaven was considered both a supreme deity expected to regulate the political realm and a designation of the ultimate cosmic reality, namely, the impartial laws of the universe. The Way was an even higher abstraction: it was a referent to the supreme principles that were supposed to influence the functioning of the cosmos, the society, and the individual. The Sage was the one who was able to grasp these principles, implement them in his life, and thereby attain super-human dimensions, approaching in his power both Heaven and the Way. Finally, the Monarch was the supreme political leader, the one without whom society would instantly disintegrate.

Each of the four terms had its separate semantic field, but there was also a certain overlap among them. The overlap was in the figure of the Sage Monarch (*sheng wang* 聖王), which Liu considered a singularly potent ideological construct. For pre-imperial thinkers, the Sage Monarch embodied an almost unattainable ideal of impeccably moral and intelligent political leadership; he was the one who was expected to bring the ultimate peace, tranquility, and prosperity. Yet this idealized figure of a future savior was hijacked by the ruthless First Emperor of Qin, who boldly proclaimed himself Sage, and elevated himself to super-human dimensions, thereby dwarfing his subjects. Later rulers rejected the First Emperor's hubris, but continued the appropriation of the mantle of the Sage Monarch, thereby strengthening the foundations of the monarchic system. Fundamentally, this association of the Monarch and the Sage continued throughout the imperial millennia and remained one of the pivotal aspects of traditional political culture. The omnipotent savior-like figure of the Sage Monarch turns everybody into "child-like subjects" and prevents emergence of a "citizen" consciousness. Liu Zehua summarized his exploration of sage-monarchs with the harsh verdict "Unless sage monarchs die out, the great turmoil cannot be stopped" (聖王不死，大亂不止).¹⁶ And, as Liu never said explicitly but repeatedly hinted at, this combination of spiritual and political power remained intact in the post-imperial period, peaking under

16. This allusion to *Zhuangzi* 莊子, "Qu qie" 胠篋 chapter ("Unless sages die out, the great robbers cannot be stopped" [聖人不死，大盜不止]) comes from the final lines of Liu Zehua's article "Wang, sheng xiandai er fen yu he er wei yi" 王、聖相對二分與合一為一, *Tianjin shehui kexue* 天津社會科學 5 (1998), 66–74; translated as "The Monarch and the Sage: Bifurcation and Unification of the Two" by Yuri Pines in *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 45.2–3 (2013–2014), 55–88.

Mao Zedong, the absoluteness of whose authority would have been inconceivable without the legacy of the idea of the Sage Monarch.¹⁷

Polemics with “New Confucians”

In the aftermath of the 1989 suppression of the student movement and a very brief and inconsequential resurrection of “Marxist orthodoxy,” China entered a period of major ideological reshuffle. A few fundamental ideas that had been at the core of intellectual life under Mao, such as the supremacy of “class struggle” and the promotion of egalitarian ideology, were discarded; and an intensive search began for new values that would contribute to the country’s stability and the legitimacy of its political system in the post-Marxist era. This was the background for the resurrection of Confucianism as an increasingly popular alternative to either semi-bankrupt Marxism, or Western-type liberalism, or just to the overwhelming ideological void that has characterized Chinese society ever since the advent of the current age of “being rich is glorious.” Many subtypes of Confucianism emerged. Some were promulgated “from below” (or from abroad) and adopted a more critical stance toward the Leninist state. Others, in distinction, gained stronger state patronage and even official endorsement. Liu Zehua’s response to these developments was visibly negative, and his criticism of what is perceived by some as a “Confucian revival” became increasingly vociferous in his last years.

Liu Zehua’s opposition to “New Confucianism” was twofold. One reason, understandably less explicitly expressed, was political. Justifiably or not, Confucianism has become increasingly associated in China with conservative, anti-liberal political trends, a reversal of the 1980s thaw. The conservative nature of this Confucian revival is strongly visible in the realm of ideology, as most New Confucians resolutely oppose the iconoclastic May Fourth Movement (1919) and its legacy. For Liu and other scholars who drew inspiration from the May Fourth Movement as a source of intellectual liberalization and ideological pluralism, this Confucian counterattack is highly unwelcome. In this context, renewed debate over China’s history, particularly the history of Chinese political thought and political culture, became once again highly relevant to the present. Should the pre-May Fourth intellectual patterns be endorsed or rejected? Liu’s answer became ever more clear. Intellectual plural-

17. Liu Zehua explored Mao’s position as a Sage Monarch more explicitly in his “Political and Intellectual Authority: The Concept of the ‘Sage Monarch’ and its Modern Fate,” in *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China*, ed. Yuri Pines, Paul R. Goldin and Martin Kern (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 273–300.

ism, liberalism, and civic consciousness mattered in his eyes more than nostalgia for the “Confucian age.”

Another, and to my mind more significant, reason for Liu Zehua’s dissatisfaction with the New Confucians was less related to Confucianism per se. Rather, it pertained to the proliferation of uncritical views about the past in the Chinese intellectual community and among the general public. According to the new “patriotic” fashion, the past is presented in an increasingly affirmative way as the source of the nation’s “five-millennia-old” glory; the unpleasant pages of China’s history are glossed over, and critical approaches toward the intellectual legacy of either the imperial or pre-imperial age are visibly receding. The embellishment of the past is evident not just on a quasi-official level (e.g., in museums) and on a popular one (movies, television serials, etc.), but also on the academic level, as an increasing number of incomprehensibly laudatory accounts of China’s past in general and its traditional political culture in particular are published annually.¹⁸ For a critical historian such as Liu Zehua, these accounts were no less frustrating than the vehement attacks on traditional values during the Cultural Revolution. They flatten Chinese history, distort the understanding of the past, and are detrimental to the historical discipline in general. Liu’s opposition to these trends was primarily that of a historian rather than that of a politically involved intellectual.

Polemics with New Confucians and other admirers of the past permeated Liu Zehua’s post-1990 publications. For instance, the primary impetus for his exploration of the concept of the “Unity of Heaven and Men, and China’s Monarchism” was the proliferation of laudatory views of this concept in several publications, which presented this unity as “harmony with nature” and even as an instance of China’s early ecological thought.¹⁹ The exploration of the concept of the “sage” and its

18. For just one example of such a laudatory account, see, for example, Cao Deben 曹德本, ed., *Zhongguo chuantong zhengzhi wenhua de xiandai jiazhi* 中國傳統政治文化的現代價值 (Beijing: Qinghua daxue, 2006). See also the New Confucian “*Jiashen Culture Manifesto*” 甲申文化宣言, the effusive language of which in praise of traditional culture ignited Liu Zehua’s ire. For the manifesto text, see <http://paper.wenweipo.com/2006/10/19/xw0610190007.htm> (accessed August 30, 2018); for Liu Zehua’s reply, see his “Guanyu changdao guoxue jige wenti de zhiyi” 關於倡導國學幾個問題的質疑 *Lishi jiaoxue* 歷史教學 5 (2009), 7–11; translated by Liu Luo as “A Few Questions Regarding Promotion of National Studies” in *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 45.2–3 (2013–2014), 128–43.

19. Liu Zehua, “Tian ren he yi yu wangquanzhuyi” 天人合一與王權主義, *Tianjin shehui kexue* 4 (1996), 83–88; translated by Yuri Pines in *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 45.2–3 (2013–2014), 89–116. For the views Liu Zehua criticizes, see, e.g., Cao Deben, ed., *Zhongguo chuantong*, 26–27.

relation to the “sage monarch” was prompted by the idealization of the sages as the epitome of the “rational and humanistic spirit” of Chinese thought in some publications. In his late years, Liu became deeply critical of the trend to promote “National Studies” (*guo xue* 國學).²⁰ Nonetheless, criticism aside, Liu was willing to collaborate with a few “National Studies” initiatives insofar as those were aimed at sustaining rather than suffocating critical views of the past and were not predicated on blind adoration of past and present “sages.”

Liu Zehua’s incisive critical spirit was not directed only against political and intellectual authorities. In marked distinction from many authoritative scholars in China and elsewhere, he was always willing to listen to criticism of his views, and if necessary to modify and moderate some of his ideas. Exceptionally, he encouraged his students to disagree with him and to engage him in debates about their teacher’s opinions. This remarkable quality explains Liu Zehua’s enormous success as a teacher. His openness to debate made him into the most admired educator in Nankai, a source of immense inspiration both for his long-term students and collaborators and to those (like the author of this obituary) who enjoyed only a relatively short period of study under this outstanding scholar. That Liu Zehua is mourned by hundreds of disciples who teach in dozens of universities in China and elsewhere, and that his ideas are debated and are present—implicitly or explicitly—in hundreds of publications in no less than half a dozen languages is the real measure of his lasting impact. R.I.P.

紀念劉澤華先生 (1935–2018)

尤銳

提要

這篇悼文介紹中國著名學者劉澤華先生及其主要著作。劉澤華先生是中國政治思想和政治文化領域的大家。本文探討劉澤華先生的個人經歷，尤其是他在文化大革命中經歷的劇變，對其歷史觀的影響。先生的經歷引發其思考：為什麼中國傳統政治文化一直屈服於王權主義思想及實踐？劉澤華對中國歷史的批判性解讀使他有別於支持傳統價值觀復興的學者們，成為中國文化保守主義的主要反對者之一。

Keywords: Liu Zehua, Confucianism, Legalism, Monarchism, Sages, Cultural Revolution

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20. See his “Guanyu changdao guoxue.”