Self as Method
Thinking Through China and the World

Xiang Biao · Wu Qi
Translated by David Ownby

palgrave
macmillan

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Introduction

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THE GENESIS OF *SELF AS METHOD*

Xiang Biao's*[1] *Self as Method* is an unusual book. It was published in China in 2020 by Dandu, a newish publishing house that promises to "unite a new generation of authors and readers through text, audio, video, and multimedia platforms."[2] The project originated with Dandu editor Luo Danni*, based on her observation that many Chinese people appear not to be very happy as "China's century" dawns. At first glance, this may seem strange because, after a century and a half of humiliation, crisis, and struggle, China in the early twenty-first century seems poised to reestablish its historical position as a (if not *the*) center of the world. Reform and opening have succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of those who initially conceived the policies, and China in 2020 is vastly richer and more powerful than China in 1980.

Yet despite China's rise, many Chinese people, and particularly Chinese young people—while patriotic and proud of China's rise—are anxious and dissatisfied, at least with their individual lives and life chances. If the policy of reform and opening has transformed the Chinese economy, it has also brought intense competitiveness, sky-rocketing real estate prices, long work days and weeks, and seemingly endless stress. Particularly in

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[1] Asterisked terms refer to the Chinese-language glossary.

[2] See https://book.douban.com/series/4717.

China's mega-cities like Beijing and Shanghai, young people often feel like they are running in place—and running hard—as China's period of high-speed growth threatens to sputter out.

Luo Danni recruited Dandu journalist Wu Qi* to work on the project, and decided to address this issue in a volume that targets younger readers, which surely made good sense. In addition to their economic anxieties, young people in China might be forgiven for feeling somewhat lost in general. Change in China has been blindingly rapid over the past few decades, to the point that Chinese authors often speak of generational groups of as few as five years (i.e., the "1995–2000 generation"). This might be an exaggeration, but it is nonetheless true that while in 1980 there were almost no private phones in China, today everyone lives on their smart phone; while in 1980, everyone rode their identical Flying Pigeon bicycle (if they could get one) to and from work or school, now they take a Didi* (China's Uber) to…the airport and hence the world (at least in pre-pandemic times).

Of course many of these changes are broadly positive and have enriched the lives of Chinese youths. Other changes, however, have impoverished their lives in perhaps equal measure. China's one-child policy, implemented between roughly 1980 and 2015, drastically reduced the size of Chinese families, particularly the extended families that have long been part of China's social fabric. One wonders what percentage of today's Chinese young people have no cousins at all, to say nothing of brothers and sisters. The demands of work have taken many parents out of the home, while still others have become "helicopter parents," singularly focused on their only child. Schools have become places of intense competition, driven by a culture of testing and achievement.

How are young people meant to think about their lives, and where are they to turn for counsel and wisdom? A Chinese twenty-something might well live her non-work life through fan culture and online reality shows which her parents probably don't "get," to say nothing of her grandparents. Many teachers are run ragged by their own busy lives, and at school have to teach the "doctrine of success" to motivate students to keep their noses to the grindstone.

These are some of the concerns Luo and Wu hoped to address in the book they imagined. Their initial thought was to seek out several Chinese intellectuals and solicit contributions from them, a format that might have produced interesting ideas without necessarily connecting with Chinese young people (a Western editor surely would have been tempted to find a

celebrity to address the issue). Ultimately, the project turned into a series of three long interviews with Xiang Biao, who at the time was a professor of social anthropology at Oxford University in Britain, one of a growing number of younger Chinese scholars who have built academic careers outside of China, something that is well respected in China. Given the strictures on what can be safely said in print in China, the book could not strike a tone of "So we finally made it—now what?" or "We're rich, but life still sucks," which might have been the American approach. Still, over the course of some 250 pages, Xiang does indeed speak to these and other concerns in a way that is both direct and indirect, personal and professional, conversational and pedagogical. Part autobiography, part how-to guide ("self as method" is meant to be prescriptive), and part intellectual manifesto, the volume is nothing if not ambitious.

This is clearly a noble cause, and one of the unusual things about it is that it worked (unlike most noble causes, at least in my experience). To date, the book has sold some 175,000 copies, which are not best-seller numbers in China's huge market, but still amazing for a book where an anthropology professor speaks at length to a journalist about "self as method." In addition, Douban—the rough Chinese equivalent of Amazon for books—named *Self as Method* the most influential book of the year for 2020, and the book has received almost 20,000 online comments on the Douban site, with many young readers enthusiastically recommending it to others. In July of 2021, Dandu organized an online celebration of the one-year anniversary of the book's publication, and some 100,000 people participated. The authors also set up an email address and invited letters from readers, and received nearly 200. In other words, the book struck a nerve and sparked a dialogue.

I discovered *Self as Method* as part of a research project on Chinese establishment intellectuals in which I have been engaged over the past decade or so.[3] In my project, I define Chinese establishment intellectuals as those who publish (mostly) in China and in Chinese, and who

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[3] For details of this project, see my website, www.readingthechinadream.com, where you can find several thousand pages of translated and curated materials. The project has produced a number of books as well: Xu Jilin, *Rethinking China's Rise: A Liberal Critique*, David Ownby, editor and translator (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Timothy Cheek, David Ownby, and Joshua A. Fogel, eds., *Voices from the Chinese Century: Public Intellectual Debate from Contemporary China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); and Qin Hui, *Globalization after the Pandemic*, David Ownby, translator, (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2021).

play by the rules of the game as prescribed by the Party-State, without being propagandists for the regime. Establishment intellectuals are not fully "independent," in the sense that there are many things that cannot be openly discussed in China, but neither are they completely mute or subservient, and honest debate over important issues occurs frequently. A central finding of my project is thus that a "republic of letters" exists in China, even if there are red zones that must be avoided and discretion is often the better part of valor.

Like youth angst, this intellectual world is also the result of reform and opening. Over the course of the past forty years, scholarly exchanges with the West, translation efforts (into Chinese), massive investments in the Chinese university system, and the spread of the Internet have produced at least two generations of Chinese intellectuals who can rival their peers anywhere on the planet in terms of cosmopolitanism, sophistication, and general knowledge about China and the world. In addition, prior to the Xi Jinping era, China's intellectual world since reform and opening had been in general *relatively* free and open, although there are certainly numerous glaring exceptions to that general statement. What this means is that establishment intellectuals in China do many of the things establishment intellectuals do anywhere: they attempt to sway public opinion, influence state policy, and convince one another on issues that matter.

At a certain point in my research, I realized that virtually every Chinese establishment intellectual I was reading was male, of Han ethnicity, and approaching retirement age, which meant that he was born between 1955 and 1965. This cohort had direct or indirect experience with the Cultural Revolution*, and came of age intellectually and professionally during the 1980s, China's most "liberal" period in recent history, which often meant that their basic political orientation was broadly "Western." But if they are retiring, they are presumably being replaced by younger intellectuals whose different life experiences surely have produced different worldviews, even if the older generation continues to dominate the journals and books I was consulting for my project. Hence I made a conscious decision to broaden my research and read something other than the Chinese equivalents of David Brooks or David Frum.

Xiang Biao (or Biao Xiang—Xiang is his family name, which comes first in the Chinese-speaking world), born in 1972, came to my attention in part as a result of this decision. I translated his 2021 essay on "The Theory of 'Concentrated Mobility' and the 'Gyro-Economy:'

Understanding Social Change in China through SARS and the Coronavirus"[4] because I found it compelling, lucid, and unique in its approach to explaining the coronavirus. Some months later, I happened onto a reference to the book *Self as Method* while reading a text penned by another Chinese anthropologist, ordered the book on Amazon, and, after spending some time with it, got in touch with Xiang to see if he was interested in an English-language translation of the book. He agreed, and here we are.

The remainder of this introduction will attempt to do three things: briefly describe Xiang Biao's scholarship prior to *Self as Method*, which is not itself "scholarly," but nonetheless builds on his life as an academic; discuss some of the recurring themes in *Self as Method* that may be somewhat challenging for the Western reader (particularly if this reader is not a China specialist); and finally, offer a summary of Xiang Biao's book both on its own terms and in the context of the broader Chinese intellectual environment I study.

Xiang Biao's Research

Xiang Biao became well-known as a scholar at a much younger age than most of us do (if we ever do), and for a particular set of reasons. He entered Peking University* in 1990, the year after the student demonstrations that led to the Tiananmen Massacre. These demonstrations had originated at Peking University, and Chinese authorities both on and off campus remained on high alert for many months after the summer of 1989, anxious to avoid further instability. Such fears led to some extraordinary measures. For example, Xiang and his fellow entering freshman did not attend classes on campus for their first year, but instead at a military camp in Shijiazhuang, a city some 300 kilometers south of Beijing, where discipline was ensured by the People's Liberation Army. The remaining four years of university returned to "normal" in the sense that they took place on the Peking University campus, but Xiang found much classroom instruction rote and uninteresting. Professors, many of whom had been traumatized by the events of 1989 as well, often preferred the security of the textbook to genuine intellectual give-and-take.

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[4] Available online at https://www.readingthechinadream.com/xiang-biao-concentrated-mobility.html.

Xiang's eventual response to this trying situation was to stop going to class and to find a project to engage his mind and his energies, something I surely could not have done as an undergraduate in the United States in the late 1970s (Xiang says that, at the time, professors did not really know what to do with their classes, and were eager to help students find alternatives). The project was an investigation of Zhejiang Village, a community of migrant workers from Xiang's home province of Zhejiang who had settled—illegally—in the southern outskirts of Beijing, hoping to make and sell clothing in China's "privatizing" economy.

This may require a bit of explanation. China's policy of reform and opening began at the tail end of the 1970s, but until the 1990s, many of the most significant reforms occurred in the rural areas, where the "responsibility system"—in which individual peasant households signed contracts with government representatives that allowed the peasants to retain their surpluses as their own profits—replaced the communes, which had been set up during the Great Leap Forward*. In other words, most if not all of the structures of collectivized agricultural production disappeared, and peasants quickly evolved into independent farmers and entrepreneurs.

Rural reform was undoubtedly a complex process, involving the restructuring of basic relationships between state and society, the rebuilding of markets, and the change of laws regarding small businesses, but the prospect of reforming the urban economy and state-owned enterprises was even more daunting. True, China had introduced Special Economic Zones in some coastal regions during the 1980s in the hopes of enticing Western firms and their technology to come to China, but this was small potatoes compared to the challenge of moving from the fixed prices and targets of the central plan to the ever-changing signals of the market. In addition, Party leaders soon realized that "market efficiency" and "profitability" would inevitably expose the flaws of China's *danwei** (work unit) system, in which large enterprises and organizations were largely unconcerned with either efficiency or profitability, and instead focused a significant portion of their attention on providing housing and an array of social services to their employees. How to convert such entities to something that would pass the test of the simplest Western/capitalist accounting standards was a riddle, and Party leaders hesitated, fearing the consequences of bankruptcies and layoffs.

The collapse and fall of the former Soviet Union between 1988 and 1991 convinced Chinese leaders of the urgency of a broader reform

program. If their erstwhile "big brother" could wither and die practically overnight, what guarantee was there that the same thing could not happen to China, whose centrally planned economy had been built in imitation of the Soviet model? Hence the 1990s marked the beginning of serious efforts to develop "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in the sense of finding a way to move aggressively toward the market and to compete on the world stage.

China's leaders remained committed to managing the process, however. Convinced that most Chinese peasants and workers lacked the *suzhi** (personal qualities) necessary to figure things out on their own, the Party hoped to "plan" the transition to the market. While this is an understandable reflex, given how "shock therapy" was working out in much of the Eastern bloc at the time, many Chinese at the poorer end of the social order were impatient to try their own hand at the market experiment. This included both peasants for whom the "responsibility system" had not been a life-saver, as well as workers stuck in low-paying jobs or laid off in the process of reform.

Zhejiang Village was one result of this impatience. Zhejiang people had long been known for their entrepreneurship and their willingness to migrate. The "Wenzhou model" of economic development, which builds on bottom-up local initiatives and family-run enterprises, testifies to the former; the fact that the first important wave of Chinese immigration to Europe during the reform and opening period was made up of Wenzhou people testifies to the latter. Zhejiang Village in south Beijing grew out of the same impulse to go where the money is and turn a profit.

In China, however, despite the formal governmental commitment to reform, setting up a migrant "village" in a part of China in which you did not personally reside ran up against a host of regulations and policies designed to control population movement and administer the planned economy. Two examples will suffice to suggest the size of the challenge the Zhejiang migrants faced: the household registration system (*hukou**), which operates like an internal passport system, was designed to keep people—mainly rural people—from moving away from their place of birth by linking the distribution of rationed goods to the place designated on their *hukou*; urban planning throughout China was similarly linked to household registration, and planners managed their cities (water supply, housing supply, traffic regulation, etc.) solely on the basis of the number of legal urban residents they believed to be living in their city. That

Zhejiang Village eventually swelled to the size of 100,000 suggests the nature of the confrontation between the migrant workers and government authorities.

In Xiang's ethnography of Zhejiang Village, he contrasts the pragmatism, flexibility, and creativity of the migrants with the rigidity and lack of imagination of government authorities. A small community of Zhejiang migrants had begun to take shape in Beijing as early as 1984, driven by experiences of desperation during the Cultural Revolution rather than by the policy of reform and opening. Between 1984 and 1986, the migrants "got a foot in the door" by renting counter space in state-owned stores to sell their clothes, and renting houses from local residents. A breakthrough occurred between 1988 and 1992 when the Wenzhou migrants learned to make leather jackets which they marketed not only in China but also in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, building on a larger network of other "Zhejiang villages" elsewhere in China and the world. Consequently, Zhejiang Village in Beijing became a hub for the circulation of capital, labor, and raw materials for Zhejiang migrant traders throughout China.

As the community grew in size and economic power, relationships with municipal authorities grew more complex. Beijing officials made some efforts to accommodate and engage with the migrants, but had difficulty "thinking outside the box" and often remained tied to rigid thinking that confined economic activities to recognized administrative boundaries based on fixed locations, a world view that the Zhejiang migrants were destroying through their own activities. Everything came to a head in 1995 (the last year of Xiang Biao's study), when the Beijing government launched a large-scale cleanup campaign in which some 2000 "shock troops" were directed to destroy the residential compounds the residents of Zhejiang Village had constructed. The migrants fled in the face of *force majeure*, but returned within a few months, and Zhejiang Village continued to grow.

Xiang's second book, based on his Oxford doctoral dissertation, was similarly concerned with economic migrants. *Global "Body Shopping:" An Indian Labor System in the Industrial Technology Industry* (Princeton 2007) was an ethnographic study of "body shopping," which refers to the complex processes by which Indian IT workers are integrated in various ways into the needs of the world's largest IT firms, which at the time were mostly American. The "body shops" (or "consultancies") are enterprises, often small and informal, found mainly in India but also abroad

wherever there are sufficient numbers of Indian IT workers, which serve as middlemen between the individual workers and the HR divisions of the large companies, taking care of paperwork, visas, housing, and other similar issues. The middlemen seek to "market" their client-workers to the foreign firms on a regular basis, but take on particular utility in moments of peak demand, such as at the end of the twentieth century, when fears of a Y2K incident created a sudden, intense need for manpower. Xiang happened to be doing his research during the run-up to Y2K, and hence focuses on it in his book, but lesser events of a similar nature happen frequently when companies roll-out new products or have to fix bugs in programs just released.

Xiang's focus was on the effects of this globalized process on the IT workers and their families. For workers, body shopping meant frequent, unpredictable dislocations, uncertain living conditions, and exposure to considerable risk (temporary workers the world over have problems getting their rights respected, and these Indian IT workers were no exception). Workers were willing to accept uncertainty and risk, because if everything worked out, they might wind up employed in the US for years, perhaps even striking gold by acquiring US citizenship, but less desirable outcomes were surely possible as well, and indeed occurred with greater frequency.

For families in India, the existence of global body shopping was seen as a way up and out of poverty, and thus structured many family decisions in terms of the education they sought out for their sons (most IT workers were men in the period Xiang studied). Body shopping thus played an important role in building the Indian "brand" in the high tech world. In addition, the phenomenon also had major effects on something as personal as marriages by significantly increasing the amounts of dowry that families of women of marriageable age offered to the IT workers. The dowries were parts of family strategies hoping to capitalize on greater life chances body shoppers promised to IT workers. Of course these dowries and their marriages were subject to the same uncertainties that characterized the body shopping system as a whole.

In both of these pioneering studies, Xiang's focus is on the effectiveness and limitations of the agency possessed by economic migrants facing the larger structures of the Chinese state, in the first study, and the globalized IT world in the second. Xiang's point is not to glorify or lionize this agency, but instead to highlight its creative potential in seeking solutions to real world problems, even as he notes where and how larger

structures or rent-seeking middlemen channel or obstruct that potential. As an ethnographer, Xiang looks at individuals as well as structures, and occasionally savors an individual "victory," but his point is not to celebrate the triumph of the "crafty peasant" over the larger system, because these systems of course have their own "agency." His method—and there is more method than theory in much of his work—is to understand how complex systems function, and then to explore the potential of individual agency within this system. At the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, I might point out that this might well be an appealing strategy for autonomous young people in China trying to actualize their agency in the People's Republic. Indeed, *Self as Method* might well be read as a reflection on potential individual agency in a complex, platform-driven, globalized world.

Xiang Biao's subsequent work has focused more broadly on problems of mobility and order, particularly in Asia. This emphasis began with a 2004 project involving field research on unskilled labor outmigration from northeast China to Japan, Singapore, and South Korea. The main finding of the project was that migration is subject to increasingly intense mediation, by multiple actors but particularly by commercial brokers. In other words, workers *are moved*, rather than moving independently, across international borders. This creates a form of labor migration Xiang calls "labor transplant," a kind of strictly controlled, point-to-point mobility, which is accomplished through a combination of government regulation and commercial facilitation.

A similar practice is "return migration," which is widely practiced in Asia. By managing migration (i.e., making it point-to-point, tied to specific employment opportunities and needs) and making it temporary, by assuring the migrants' return to their home country at the end of their contract, Asian countries accommodate increasing transnational mobility into the nation-state framework of governance, an approach that helps avoid the political tensions generated in the United States, where certain companies or even industries are sustained through illegal migration, with capital turning a blind eye until populist tensions result in intermittent government interventions often designed to score political points, generally at the expense of the migrants.

Xiang Biao has paid particular attention to how mobility and order have evolved in China over the course of reform and opening. Until reform and opening, China was of course a country characterized by extremely limited mobility, as suggested in the above discussion of the

household registration system, whose express purpose was to keep people in their assigned places. This stance changed importantly but informally during reform and opening, as migrant labor left China's villages to work in factories or on construction sites, but the system was exploitative, unstable, and often abusive (and in many ways quite similar to the situation with illegal migrants in the United States) because migrant workers had few if any rights, and were viewed as temporary workers who would eventually leave the cities and indeed could be evicted at the whims of municipal authorities.

Over the past decade or two, this half-hearted embrace of mobility has been replaced by a very different attitude on the part of China's authorities, who have come to see mobility as a source of stability rather than instability. Restrictions on migrant labor have *generally* eased, although there remains work to be done and such workers are as often instrumentalized by the forces of Chinese state capitalism as they are "liberated" to do what they wish. But beyond the issue of migrant labor, the muscle of China's supply chains and logistics industry—to say nothing of its delivery and ride-sharing services—is grounded in mobility. Rather than creating the industries or the jobs that can keep China's economy growing, the Party-State instead increasingly creates the conditions that allow people to attempt to solve their own employment issues, and mobility is one of the most important of these conditions.

Of course, much of this mobility is linked to China's rapidly expanding platform economies (Taobao, Meituan, Didi) and their algorithms, which means that mobility is tied to the dubious "freedoms" of what we tend to call the gig economy. China's government currently seems to be trying to strike a balance between supporting the platforms—because they create lots of jobs, however precarious—and intervening fitfully to correct the worst abuses on the platforms practice. For the moment, platforms and the mobility they facilitate seem to function as a force producing more order than disorder. In part, this is because many Chinese workers have embraced the logic of hard work and precarity, working very hard in what ultimately can be dead-end jobs in the hopes of saving up enough money to start a business. Their thinking is: "Make the money and move on. It's not worth it to fight the bosses or the government."

Xiang Biao's current research takes aim at these platforms which, in China and elsewhere, rival governments in terms of their impact on the lives and thoughts of all of us. His ultimate goal is to open people's eyes

to the myriad ways in which the platforms "manage" our lives, in the hopes of exploring and awakening the potential agency that still exists at the individual and social level.

Interview Themes in *Self as Method*

Self as Method is a set of three interviews conducted in March, August, and December of 2018, in Beijing, Oxford, and Wenzhou, respectively, although putting the book together took considerably more time, both before and after the interviews took place. The first interview starts out being biographical and chronological, and the first four chapters cover Xiang's youth, his experience of the 1980s, his experience at Peking University, and his research on Zhejiang Village. But because Xiang is an expansive talker who is sometimes uncomfortable talking about himself, and because the book is meant to address themes broader than Xiang's experience or research, the interviews often swerve off into areas inspired by his life or his work, and the book becomes increasingly thematic as it proceeds, although it circles back to moments in Xiang's biography—such as his time in Singapore as a postdoctoral student. Some of themes may strike Western readers as a bit opaque, and instead of littering the text with multiple explanatory notes, I thought it might be helpful to address them in a more general way here.[5]

One major theme, or image, that occurs repeatedly throughout the book is that of the "gentry," or a "gentry disposition." In China, as in many other countries, the word "gentry" refers to the upper-middle classes (but not necessarily the ruling elite), but in China's case, the gentry is also connected to Confucianism and Confucian scholars. This is because, beginning in the Song dynasty (960–1279), virtually all members of China's civil service were selected through the Confucian examination system, which continued to function (except for the brief Mongol interlude between 1271 and 1368) until its abolition in 1905. To most Western ears, the term "civil servant" lacks panache; we think of faceless bureaucrats or the people who deliver our mail. In China, by contrast, those who passed the examinations to become civil servants

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[5] Xiang hosted me at the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology—where he is now Director—in early October 2021 so that I could interview him about his book. These interviews were recorded, and will eventually be available on the institute's website at the following address: https://www.eth.mpg.de/2946085/institute.

were envied and respected, in part because of the difficulty of the process. It took years of patient study and required the memorization of a large number of classical texts and commentaries, in addition to the ability to write highly structured but persuasive essays.

The examinations were held—usually every three years—at three levels: local (the starting point for all candidates was their native place), provincial, and in the capital. To be employed as a civil servant, it was necessary to succeed at least at the provincial level, if not higher. Local examinations served only to select the most talented for the higher-level examinations, but anyone who passed the local examinations was nonetheless recognized as a "scholar" and received certain privileges and a great deal of respect. This was even true to a lesser extent for those who tried and failed at the local level. The respect for scholars was such that merchant families with the means to do so would encourage at least some of their sons to try their hand at the examinations, a way of "diversifying their portfolio."

When we talk about China's "gentry," we are generally talking about these local scholars, those whose efforts did not propel them into the ranks of the civil servants posted throughout the empire, but who instead stayed in their native places to become "natural leaders" if they possessed the necessary personal qualities. Such leadership was necessary because government presence at the local level was generally quite thin; for all intents and purposes, government stopped at the county level, while the majority of Chinese lived in villages. In addition, county magistrates were always "outsiders" (an anti-corruption measure), and their mandates were quite short (three years—another anti-corruption measure). Often, they knew little about the area they were meant to govern, and in many cases would not have been able to understand the local dialect.

To a large degree, then, the local gentry were what made traditional China work. Any country magistrate worth his salt consulted them on a regular basis, because they were the link between him and the population he was attempting to govern. Moreover, in the absence of police or law courts at the local level, the gentry played a major role in dispute resolution and community management. This obviously required an intimate knowledge of local affairs, an engaged commitment to community "harmony," and the ability to solve problems through persuasion and the use of personal relations—although of course some local gentry were members of powerful families who could impose their will by force if necessary.

When Xiang Biao talks about his "gentry disposition," he is talking about this kind of groundedness in a community, be it local or global (social media makes this possible), and a personal concern for the well-being of that community. The brief description above of Xiang's research illustrates his posture as a "gentry scholar." He spent years in Zhejiang Village, less as a "neutral observer" and more as an embedded ethnographer who implicated himself in the community to the point of helping them to solve concrete problems and disputes. When working on "body shopping," Xiang shared the homes and meals of the Indian high tech workers in Australia and India. "Theory" plays a part in Xiang's research, but his goal is not to make a contribution to a theoretical abstraction, but rather to use theory to cast light on the community he is observing and the problems they are facing. The gentry are part of the community they "study," and thus care about the welfare of that community in human terms.

What Xiang Biao means by "gentry disposition" comes into clearer focus when we look at three other themes that appear in *Self as Method*: the 1980s, Peking University, and centers and peripheries.

As a decade, the 1980s has a particular resonance in China, representing a somewhat giddy interlude between the end of the Cultural Revolution (Mao* died in 1976, but it took a couple of years for Deng Xiaoping* to turn the Party-State in a different direction) and the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989. Despite this somber ending, the 1980s were certainly the most open, liberal period in the history of the PRC. Foreign tourists came in, followed by foreign radio and television. Chinese students began to study abroad. Intellectually, the 1980s were a period of great experimentation, resulting in what was known as the "culture craze," or a "second enlightenment" (the first having occurred during the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s and early 1920s) in which China's intellectuals debated once again the meaning of China and tradition, the West and modernity, in the hopes of locating a cultural autonomy that would move China forward.

If it is possible to feel nostalgia for someone else's past, the West is nostalgic for China's 1980s—as are certain Chinese, of course. It was widely believed at the time that China had abandoned communism and was moving toward some kind of democracy, or perhaps democratic socialism. Given everything that has transpired since, Western China-watchers tend to see the 1980s as a missed opportunity, and the Chinese intellectuals who cut their teeth during the decade tend to see it as their "glory days."

Xiang Biao was a teenager for much of the decade of the 1980s, and remembers the excitement of the "culture craze" largely through some of its most mediatized moments, such as the television series *River Elegy*,* which aired in the weeks preceding the Tiananmen Massacre. Xiang hated the tone of *River Elegy*, which pontificated on the contrast between the "blue oceans" of the mobile West and the "yellow soil" of a stagnant China in a voice that reminds me of the war propaganda reels shown in American theaters during World War II. For Xiang, the "culture craze" came to symbolize a flight to abstraction or a chain of endless empty speech bubbles. Intellectuals spent their time posturing and debating rather than problem-solving or checking in with the people. He insists that that there were genuine debates between reformers and their opponents within the government and within the Party, and that real change was a true possibility. Had intellectuals acted like local gentry instead of talking heads, the situation might not have reached the extreme that pushed the Party to take action against the demonstrators. This is of course no apology for the violence, but in Xiang's eyes, if the 1980s were a "missed opportunity," this is the opportunity that was missed.

Xiang Biao's discussion of Peking University points to another element of his gentry disposition. He was a student at the university in March of 1992 when the news of Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour" was broadcast over the university loudspeakers. This was the moment when Deng gave his full backing to economic reform and began to move China out of the conservative, repressive posture it had occupied since Tiananmen and toward thorough-going marketization. From Xiang's perspective as a student and later a professor, this also marked the moment when Peking University—as well as other universities—began to transform themselves into "players" in the fast-growing economy, turning campus buildings and assets into "resources" that could be "leveraged" for money and power.

The process started slowly, but anyone who spent time in a Chinese university before the 1990s (as I did, having lived in both Nanjing and Beijing in the 1980s) recognizes the immense transformation that has taken place, both in terms of infrastructure and amenities and of the relationship between the university and the economy.

Xiang Biao fully understands the logic of this transformation and appreciates its positive aspects, but at the same time mourns the passing of an older Peking University identity that saw the students as intimately linked to the state of the nation. This vision involves memories that go back at least to the May Fourth Movement of 1919, when Beida*

students led the protests against the betrayal of China—by members of her own government—at the Versailles Conference, and continue through the actions that marked the end of the Maoist era (wreath-laying on the occasion of the death of Zhou Enlai*, for example), or the protests that led to the Tiananmen Massacre. In this perspective, Beida represents the throbbing heart of the idealism of the young, of their engagement with the destiny of the nation and perhaps the world.

After thirty years as a "resource," however, Beida has become just another revolving door linking money, politics, and academia, a Chinese version of Harvard's Kennedy School, a center of elite production and reproduction, the throbbing heart of which is the stock market. Qian Liqun*, a retired Beida literature professor, once remarked that schools like Beida are currently producing "exquisite egotists," "who are sophisticated, worldly, thoughtful, good at playing a role, good at fitting in, and even better at using the system to pursue their own goals. By exquisite egotists, I mean egotists who have been skillfully dressed up or even disguised."[6] Of course, this does not describe all Beida students, but it does capture the ethos of the age to a certain extent, and this ethos has little to do with the "gentry disposition."

A related theme, also explored in *Self as Method*, is the contrast Xiang draws between centers and peripheries, by which he means the centripetal force exerted by China's major cities as centers of wealth, power, modernity, and hence status. He cites scholars who argue that the true decline of China's traditional order began in the early twentieth century when the gentry no longer returned to their home towns after retirement, but remained instead in the big cities. The Mao era, with its household registration system and planned economy, slowed this process, but it has resumed with a vengeance under reform and opening, so that anyone with any ambition sets their sights on Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, or Shenzhen. This not only contributes to the stifling sense of crowded competition that defines life in China's mega-cities; it also drains China's regions of talent and meaning—to say nothing of China's rural areas. Of course, this imbalance is not unique to China; similar trends in America ("coastal elites vs. the forgotten hinterland") are often cited to explain the rise of populism and the success of Donald Trump. But Xiang imagines a sense of "groundedness" that would not be a source of resentment or reaction, but instead a healthy engagement with community.

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[6] For more on Qian's remarks (in Chinese), see https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJNrGq.

The Meaning of *Self as Method*

Self as Method is ultimately a kind of manifesto. It is addressed to young citizens of China—and the world—and it calls on them to examine their "selves," not as consumers, not as profit-maximizing individualists, and not as part of a particular political or social movement. What Xiang Biao calls for is a kind of intellectual activism, grounded in the idea that in our global, wired universe, most people have the resources to understand their position in the various worlds they occupy, and on the basis of that understanding, to activate their agency to solve problems, thus making life better for individuals and communities. Because he is a scholar, Xiang's particular means of activating his agency involves the tools of social science, which is a way of producing knowledge that might help others activate their agency, but he does not view scholarly agency and knowledge production as superior to the achievements of the entrepreneurs of Zhejiang Village, to take one example. There are of course structures and forces that limit and channel our agency in ways that we have no choice but to acknowledge, but agency is always an exploration of the possible, and not a pie-in-the-sky search for escape or transcendence.

There is a kind of can-do optimism behind this vision, which in part is surely based on China's recent experience. In the West, we constantly bemoan the fact that the policy of "engagement" with China in recent decades did not produce the liberal, democratic China we were hoping for. The idea, of course, was that market forces would create wealth, which would produce a middle class, which would create civil society and pluralism, all of which would eventually produce a democratic China. It is true that China's government remains Leninist and authoritarian, and that our prediction was wrong on that front, but this overlooks the fact that much of what the West foresaw for a "capitalist" China—outside of the political realm—did indeed come to pass. China's transformation over the past forty years has been nothing short of remarkable, and the material improvements in the lives of most Chinese are beyond question.

None of this is an apology for the many serious problems that remain in China, but it should not be hard to understand the immense pride that many Chinese people feel in reflecting on what their country has accomplished in the past few decades. Intellectuals like Xiang Biao are thoroughly aware of the shortcomings of China's government—and some may indeed feel that China accomplished this transformation *in spite of*

the Leninist state rather than because of it—but it is not hard to understand that even Chinese liberals who would prefer that China respect human rights and the rule of law remain nonetheless appreciative of what China has managed to pull off, not only in terms of GDP growth and poverty reduction, but also in terms of education, urbanization, and technological innovation, developments in which have changed the very texture of life in China for many.

Self as Method is a call to China's youth to build on the potential that China has created by starting with their "selves," their individual lives and thinking brains. At many points in the book, Xiang notes that the distinctions between intellectuals and non-intellectuals—in China or in any technologically advanced society—have largely disappeared, because everyone has access to a universe of knowledge on their cell phone. Of course, the dangers of the digitized world, notably fake news and information bubbles, are much on our minds of late—and with good reason—but we should not discount the way in which increased knowledge and connectivity could enhance agency, should we make the choice to imbue this agency with a "gentry disposition."

It might be objected that this is a "manifesto without politics" and an "agency without public engagement," which I think is largely true. There is no fruitful way for Chinese young people to craft a politics of direct resistance, however tired they may be of some aspects of Chinese political discourse and practice. There are similar frustrations with politics in the West, even if greater freedom of speech allows us to make more noise, which sometimes works. But Chinese people have displayed considerable energy and creativity as they have transformed their lives over the past few decades, which suggests that there is often, if not always, a way to employ one's agency to improve conditions for the self and for the community, and the first step is an intellectual understanding of the potential of that agency within the constraints imposed by all social and political systems. The fact that 175,000 people bought *Self as Method* surely suggests that optimism and faith continue to exist in China, whatever the challenges Chinese people face. In that sense, *Self as Method* calls not for an abandonment of politics, but a redefinition of politics.

A Word on the English-Language Edition of *Self as Method*

My goal in translating Xiang Biao's *Self as Method* was to make it readable, even to readers who are not China specialists. I also wanted to convey the flavor of what was generally a very lively conversation. Consequently I sought first to understand the meaning of Wu Qi's questions and Xiang Biao's answers, and to find English-language equivalents of those questions and answers. In other words, I did not aim for a literal translation, but instead tried to think of how we would say the same or similar things in English. Xiang Biao read and corrected the translation, so we can vouch for its accuracy.

In the course of translating and checking the translation, we also did a certain amount of editing, correcting errors or imprecisions that we found in the original version. Occasionally, we removed passages that seemed repetitive or which, on reflection, required too much explanation. We generally resisted the temptation to update topical references unless such updates were very simple. None of these changes are indicated in the English-language translation; we felt that filling the text with brackets and parentheses would be an unnecessary distraction and that most readers would not be particularly concerned about minor editing issues.

We opted not to include Chinese characters in the text, but include a Chinese-language glossary of the names and terms appearing in the volume. All of these are marked with an asterisk on their first appearance in the text.

Beijing Interview, March 2018

Setting the Stage

Wu Qi: I first wanted to ask why you are interested in the interview format. In China, it is not too common, and most scholars are not used to expressing themselves through interviews. In part, this is because interviews don't count on their CVs, and with the decline in mass media in the past few years, there are even fewer quality interviews with scholars.

Xiang Biao: For me, it is a learning process to set my ideas in order in Chinese. What is really important is that in an interview setting we won't use scholarly language, which means that what we talk about will be more down to earth. So this will not be "fake language," and will also be things that I've already thought through. You can only talk clearly about things you have already thought through. Thinking clearly through muddled ideas and communicating them in the straight language is a major achievement. So for me, an interview is a process of personal growth.

Even more important is that it is interactive. An interview will allow me to communicate with today's young people. This is very important because in this way I can hear what they have to say and see some changes as they are occurring. Not all changes are huge revolutionary changes, but every moment of our lives might mark a historical turning point, which means they are latent with possibility. Understood in this way, grasping these turning points becomes an important issue.

My sense is that students and young people are looking for tools to help them think and explore. This is something they care a lot about, and

the tools they need today are not like the tools we used in the past. In the past, it was enough to have the tools to understand the functioning of the economy, the redistribution of social resources, and city planning. These were the classical tools of empirical research and policy research. Such tools, in the hands of experts, were one of the principal means by which we pushed change forward. But today's society is different because of social media and platform economies. In addition, the educational level of young people is much higher, and what we need now are tools that will help everyone to reflect. Such tools are not external, like a computer or a smartphone that someone can give you; these tools need to be inside your brain, so that you can manage problems and move forward. You will also transform these tools, or abandon them for something else if they prove not to work. As a social scientist, I feel that my work is to be an incubator of such tools. There is nothing I can give you, and can only inspire you or perhaps wake you up. We need to change the old model where the expert tells the people what to do.

Wu Qi: On the theme of interactivity, I hope that in the interview we can combine the story of your life experiences with your academic work so that we can understand how you have gotten to where you are, and what the links between your life experiences and your scholarship are. From another angle, I may bring in my own questions, including doubts and uncertainties encountered in my work life, and especially things I have observed in the young people around me. In this context, I might mention the example of Professor Dai Jinhua*[1] (b. 1959), whose courses I took at university and who influenced me a great deal. Later on, when working in media I had a chance to interview her, at which point I began to understand the distance between concepts discussed in the classroom and real social practice, as well as the urgent need to close this distance. I remember Professor Dai having said that her generation is to blame for a lot of today's problems.

Xiang Biao: What do you mean by "they are to blame"?

Wu Qi: My understanding of her meaning was: how did those ideas, that looked to be correct, wind up being so problematic when put into practice? Was it that our work was unsatisfactory? Or that other people's work was more satisfactory than ours? In fact, what needs to be done is, to sum up some practical wisdom, which would be a bigger help to

[1] Translator's note: Dai Jinhua is professor of comparative literature at Beijing University and a well-known cultural critic. Some of her work is available in English translation.

today's youth than reassessing the older generation's intellectual work. So I am curious as well as to how the lives of my professors and senior academics came to be, how much of what they did was the product of an era or an environment, and how much was the result of their individual qualities, and which parts of these experiences can be shared and learned from. This might help us to make a closer connection to our readers, and does not seem to be too far-fetched.

Xiang Biao: You absolutely have to bring in your own experience, otherwise everything else will seem superficial. Understanding the world necessarily comes through our own heartfelt experiences. One of our problems today is that intellectuals are not plugged into reality, and cannot explain things in concrete terms that reflect their actual existence, and instead express themselves in terms that are inorganic and intangible. If you ask me a question and I respond directly, then this is a great opportunity, in my view. Of course, there is a limitation, which is that I am still fairly young. I might look back on life differently 20 or 25 years from now, but now I might not be able to tell what impact my youth and adolescence have had on my life. Although I'm willing to think about it, I am not at a point where I am naturally reflecting on my life. So I think we should aim for an interview based on ideas and reflections on the current state of affairs, interspersed with some of my personal experiences, in other words, an intellectual interview with a concrete person. I really hope that it winds up being a dialogue aimed at young people, so we will need for you to ask questions from their perspective.

Wu Qi: Then maybe we should start by talking about your own youth, and if we run into topics we need to discuss, we will take them up in turn.

Xiang Biao: We can start with specific questions or with my personal experience, and then edit later if we need to.

Wu Qi: Fine. In any event, the conversation may be a long process.

A Childhood Picture

Wu Qi: We don't know that much about your personal story. In one of your articles in Chinese, "Responses and Reflections—How We Narrate the Present and Grasp History: With Further Thoughts about the Public Role of Anthropology," you talked about growing up in the 1980s and the 1990s. You mentioned that "the urgent demands of students at the time were for individual freedom, social autonomy, political democracy, and economic openness, and the original socialist system was seen as a historical burden to be abandoned." What did you think about when you were young, or when you were a child?

 Xiang Biao: I used to think my youth was completely boring, but when I look back on it now, there were some things that were interesting. Wenzhou in the early 1980s had embraced commercialization pretty thoroughly, but my family was a bit different. We lived in the dormitory of the middle school where my mother taught. The dorm was a converted classroom building. In the beginning, three families shared a kitchen and later on it was two families. The kitchen was about ten square meters, and there was a slogan on the wall that said "Seize Revolution, Increase Production," as well as pictures of Mao. When I was little I would always ask my mother what it meant to "seize revolution," because to me, the word "seize" (*zhua**) meant to "catch" bad guys. How could you "catch" revolution, since it was a good thing? I wondered about this for a long time.

Before I started going to school, I spent most of my time at my grandfather's house. My grandfather was an unusual character. His father was one of the first to be sent by the Qing government to study in Japan, selected through national exams. He probably went to Japan in the 1890s, with people like Shen Honglie* (1882–1969), who later became the governor of Zhejiang under the Guomindang. My great-grandfather studied in a naval academy in Japan, and after he came back he worked in the navy of a Beiyang militarist*[1] in Shanghai. He abandoned his family in Wenzhou (Yueqing county), married again in Shanghai, and started smoking opium. After the establishment of the People's Republic he was labeled a reactionary and fell into poverty, after which he returned home to Yueqing. My grandfather was a product of this ruined landlord family, and this background mattered a lot. He later became a worker in a factory run by a relative of his, and in the 1950s, after this factory was converted into a joint public–private enterprise, he became a mid-level manager in this collective. He and his father were quite distant; we would say now that they didn't have many feelings for one another. But he was proud of his father, believing that he was a "somebody." So my grandfather had the aura of a fallen aristocrat. He was not at all like his neighbors. He liked to comment on things and people, and tended to frame events with concepts and opinions, assigning things meaning and value. His relationship to the new society was also complex, neither simply rejecting it nor praising it. He had his own views and a sense of distance that suited him. My grandfather influenced me a lot, because I grew up with him from a very young age.

But the house where I stayed with my grandfather—and this has to do with his "fallen family" background—was in a really low-class area, basically inhabited by dock-workers, who were unloading grain onto wooden carts that they pulled themselves. The woman next door was a prostitute. Our houses were like huts, nailed together out of wooden planks, with huge cracks between them. The kids who were bigger than I was would climb up the wall to watch the prostitute between the cracks, because she and her clients made a lot of noise. I didn't really know what it was all about, but once the neighbors started arguing I would hear all about

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[1] Translator's note: The Beiyang government was the internationally recognized government of China between 1912 and 1927. After the death of Yuan Shikai*, however, the power of the Beiyang government disintegrated, and China came to be dominated by regional warlords, or militarists.

it. There were fights all the time, where somebody would be accused of stealing electricity, or stealing water. There were also neighbors who worked in factories, and I could tell there was a difference between them and the ones that worked on the docks. I remember one family clearly, because all the young people admired one of the daughters, who was maybe 10 years older than I was and got a job at a canning plant through connections. On New Year's and holidays she could bring home canned goods, and we were all envious.

So when I was little I lived among three different worlds. One was that run-down district; another was the world of the fallen nobility of my grandfather; and finally, after I started going to school, there was the school where my parents lived, and where I heard more "orthodox" speech. Every morning at breakfast my father made me listen to the news broadcast from the central government, followed by the radio program "A New Song Every Week". I learned a lot of official expressions and developed an interest in reciting things. These three social environments were different, which may have helped me to understand differences in life. Of course, I more or less identified myself with the intellectual world, because my parents were intellectuals, and what's more, at that time intellectuals were an important topic. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, editorials in the People's Daily talked about "respecting knowledge and talent," and stressed that "science and technology are the number one productive forces." This is what we called "the springtime of science." Our neighbors in the school dormitory talked all day long about implementing the state policy on improving intellectuals' living standards and political status.

What is interesting is, at that time, people in all the three surroundings had a strong political consciousness. I have vivid memory of my neighbors praising one of Chen Yun's[2]* talks in the 1980s, in which he said that "without industry there is no wealth; without agriculture there is no stability; without commerce there is no dynamism." In fact, my neighbors had nothing at all to do with agriculture, but they were concerned about it. Where my grandfather lived, when one family was eating, the neighbors would come over and crowd around the table and see what you ate. People's conversations were also about politics, involving comments on the current situation, with judgements about political figures.

[2] Translator's note: Chen Yun (1905–1995) was an important figure in the Chinese Communist Party and worked together with Deng Xiaoping to implement the policies of reform and opening.

An important topic was the price of food. Every day people watched one another buying food, and would always ask how much you paid and complain about how much the prices had gone up. A major change at the time was that we started to have free markets for agricultural products, which meant that people were always asking whether you bought that fish at the state market or the private market. Prices were better at the government market, but you had to stand in line a long time. At the private market, vendors could sell goods for the price they wanted to, so things were more expensive, but there was more variety. I found people were very ambivalent about market economy. Later on I learned that it is fairly rare for ordinary people to pay so much attention to politics elsewhere in the world. For example I found out that Japanese people don't talk politics at the dinner table, that it is considered uncivilized behavior. I thought this is really strange, and asked my Japanese wife why. She said that talking politics might get in the way of friendships. Everyone's political views are different, so the wife might not know who the husband voted for, or the father might not know who his son voted for.

Wu Qi: Which people and which events had the most influence on you when you were a child?

Xiang Biao: One of my uncles was really smart, and his observations about the things around him were very sensitive and accurate. If you ever do fieldwork you will learn that in any village, there is always someone who can explain the local situation very clearly. This is not easy. If we talk to young people, and have them sit down and explain their group, their school, how the system functions and what the basic power structure and guiding ideas are, what everyone's motivation is, how many different groups they are divided into—most people can't do this. This is in fact a really important sort of training. Everyone should be interested in their own little world, and consciously explain their life in their own terms, as a sort of independent narrative. You don't necessarily have to think deeply about it, narrative is enough.

My uncle had a big influence on me, because he had a vision of what was happening around him. For example, when making New Year's cakes, he could explain the whole thing systematically, from dissolving the sugar in the water, to adding the rice flour, to cooking and waiting for it to cool, tracing out the principles involved and the connection of one thing to another, forming an overall vision. The idea of "vision" is important. The word for "theory" in Latin means "vision," which suggests that coming up with a theory is the same as coming up with a vision of the world.

I once wrote an article in English entitled "Theory as Vision," in which I argued that theory is not a judgement, but instead an accurate picture of reality, which can also give rise to another vision of a possible future. Early socialist art was like this, in that what they painted was not a mechanical reflection of the world, but instead an exact reflection of the world. What does "exact" mean? It means you have accurately grasped the future direction something will take. The difference between "mechanical" and "exact" is huge; "mechanical" is taking a photograph, but "exact" means that not only have you understood what the thing is now, but also what it may become. So "vision" has two meanings: one is a description of the present, and the other extends to a possible future.

The older brother of this uncle also had a certain influence on me. He tested into university in 1958 or 1959, but the university rejected him because my grandfather had been branded as a rightist. Later on, in 1967 or 1968, he actively participated in all sorts of social movements, and even if he avoided being labeled as one of the "three types of people"—rebels, factionalists, and destructive elements—he got into a lot of trouble at the end of the Cultural Revolution, and as a result could not work for the government. He told me one day all of a sudden, when I was still in elementary school, that the Cultural Revolution was not completely wrong. He said, look at those cadres. Even in the 1960s they were already riding around in cars, wearing leather shoes, getting fatter every day. Mao said that it won't do for things to continue like that. A mass movement is the only solution.

This made a deep impression on me because, before this, I had heard a lot of politically correct talk saying that the Cultural Revolution was bad, but here was my uncle, who had suffered so much and stayed silent for so long, finally having his say about the Cultural Revolution. Even today it touches me in many ways. We should not judge the Cultural Revolution simply to have been either right or wrong. For this uncle who had lived through that experience, the Cultural Revolution was a classic tragedy, if we understand tragedy in terms of its ancient Greek meaning, as a potentially sublime thing that not only fails, but also creates a huge destructive force. In this case behind the tragedy is an internal contradiction: a socialist revolution must constantly foment mass movements to prevent bureaucratization, because we can't let the people's representatives get fatter and fatter and ride around in cars, but how precisely should we prevent this? We still don't have the right answer to this question. But if you look at things this way, you wind up with a new understanding of history.

Wu Qi: When you heard about these politicized people and events at the time, what concrete effect did it have on the shaping of your personality?

Xiang Biao: I was lucky to be able to hear such viewpoints when I was young. The environment of my youth perhaps made me into a social researcher with a "gentry (*xiangshen**) disposition."[3] What do I mean by "gentry disposition?" First, the gentry don't like modern intellectuals. Because everyone in my family said that being an intellectual was a good job, I always thought that it was natural that I would turn out to be an intellectual, but I don't really like Enlightenment-style intellectuals.[4] When I was in high school in the 1980s, I started to read different books, but I wasn't too interested in the *Toward the Future**[5] sort of books, like *China on the Edge**[6] or the television program "River Elegy."[7] When *River Elegy* came out I was already in my second year of high school, and could understand it with no problem. It did move me a lot and I thought it deserved to be taken seriously, but at the same time I felt a strong sense of distance from it, and I didn't like its preachiness, its exaggerated style, its rush to judgement.[8]

Second, gentry scholars are also not exactly like researchers, even if research is part of what they do. A very important thing that the gentry do is to become extremely familiar with their village and develop a narrative

[3] Translator's note: See discussion in the introduction.

[4] Translator's note: "Enlightenment-style intellectuals" refers to intellectuals who participated in China's "second Enlightenment" in the 1980s (the first Enlightenment was during the May Fourth period). See discussion in the introduction.

[5] Translator's note: "Toward the Future" was a well-known translation series edited by Jin Guantao* and Liu Qingfeng*, focused on science and modernization. There were many such efforts in the 1980s, as Chinese intellectuals sought to reestablish contact with the outside world after the relative isolation of the Maoist period.

[6] Translator's note: Written by futurologist He Bochuan* (b. 1962), *China on the Edge* offered a critical view of China's future and provoked great controversy when it was published in 1989. An English translation exists.

[7] Translator's note: "River Elegy" was a six-part television documentary that aired in China in 1988. Its depiction of Chinese traditional culture was extremely negative, which provoked considerable discussion and condemnation.

[8] Translator's note: The tone of "River Elegy" is extremely didactic, and the narrative style reminds me of U.S. government propaganda films produced during World War II, the kind of short film that would be played in movie theaters. Parts of *River Elegy* are available on YouTube, for example at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39j4ViRxcS8&t=1300s.

about it based on their familiarity. The narrative is an internal narrative. What do I mean by internal? I mean that it can clearly convey the flavor of the system in which those different people live, explain the system as a sum of the accumulation of the people and the things that constitute it over time, without abstract deductions. This means that the language the gentry scholar uses is basically the language of the place, the language the actors themselves use to describe their lives.

Such internal narratives are an important reason explaining how our traditional Confucian culture could sustain such an extensive imperial state system. When we look at the local gazetteers*[9] produced in the past, the image we find of the empire in these gazetteers is very different from the vision we entertain today. They don't say that Beijing is better than us, that we are marginal, that we belong to the empire. In their imagination, the basic principles of the empire, which are Confucian ethical principles, have been internalized by every individual and every place, no matter where they may be. Which means that every "place" has its empire—or is its own empire—even if there is no emperor in that place. The relationships the gazetteers imagined between localities and the center were not hierarchical relationships of superior and inferior, but instead were like the moon shining on ten thousand lakes, so that each lake had its own moon, which is what everyone relied on to build a sense of commonality. When a member of the gentry left his hometown to serve in the capital, this was not necessarily something to celebrate too much, because his hometown was the anchor of his sense of meaning. To finish first in the imperial examinations and serve as prime minister was a great thing, of course, but family members often stayed in the successful gentry member's hometown, and once he was no longer an official, he went home. This is why some people say that one of the first signs of China's modernization was when retired officials stopped returning home after they retired. This meant that the circular relationship between the city and the villages had been broken. Not to go back to the village after retirement illustrates what kind of changes modernity wrought in the relationship between China's center and peripheries, between China's cities and villages, and between intellectuals and ordinary people (most of whom were farmers).

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[9] Translator's note: Local gazetteers were locally produced presentations of a county, prefecture, or province, covering various aspects of history, geography, economy, famous local families, etc.

In the local areas, most of the intellectuals did not go elsewhere to serve as officials, but instead became local gentry, living in harmony with their small universe. They neither needed nor desired outside recognition, and whether the outside world noticed them, whether the things they wrote circulated in that outside world, was not particularly important to them. What was important was to have a clear understanding of their own corner of the world. This meant that they paid close attention to the details of daily life, like quarrels, marriages, funerals, relations between parents and children, appreciating the deep meanings behind these things.

But the gentry were also different from the modern researchers I just mentioned. Modern scholars have been trained to do research, and anthropologists, for example, also have to pay attention to details, but the point of the local gentry's observation is to arrive at a vision, to carve out a narrative, a narrative that reflects reality in a way local people will understand. So on the one hand you can say that it is very meticulous, very empirical, but at the same time it pays a lot of attention to overall structure.

In addition, local gentry make ethical judgements. They judge whether something is good or bad. Researchers don't do this. They have to be value-neutral and just look at the facts. But the gentry are not like moralists either, in that the gentry do not make their ethical judgements on standards drawn from books. Their ethical judgements have to measure up to the practical ideals of the common people. In the ethical judgements of the Confucian gentry, one important consideration is harmony. The point is not whether you as an individual were right or wrong, but rather what you did is or is not in harmony with other people. Thus an overview of the entire situation is very important. In this way you understand how the world is put together, and you understand how political and economic relations matter. Look at the old people. They understand the village—how much money the villagers earn, how much they pay in taxes, how much they should give in gifts—the old folks can tell you down to the penny. At the same time these details are put together through meaning, such as what kind of person or thing is worthy of respect, what kind of thing is beyond the pale; all of this is stitched together through meaning. The gentry are empirical, because they have to be able to describe the life of the villagers, but they also pay a lot of attention to meaning, and their thinking has a clear ethical bent. I'm not saying that this is the work I do, but this is my basic interest and orientation: how I feel about what is

interesting, what theories or explanations are interesting, has a lot to do with this gentry disposition.

Wu Qi: When you bring up the gentry, I immediately think of Fei Xiaotong* (1910–2005).[10] Can we say that what you are talking about is an extension of his scholarly tradition?

Xiang Biao: I never thought about carrying forward a scholarly tradition. It's true that we talk about "tradition" at Beida,[11] but it's not all that serious, and it wasn't until I got to Britain that I understood how seriously the British take tradition. For me, individually, it has never occurred to me to define an intellectual by way of a tradition. But I think Fei Xiaotong was a fascinating scholar. I can easily understand his gentry disposition. His grasp of society was also a vision beginning from the inside and working out, avoiding external judgements, and the portrait he painted was one that was meaningful to people inside, and had a certain ethical grounding.

Fei's concept of the "differential mode of association"[12] is a good example. Most people now use it as descriptive device. To my mind, the

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[10] Translator's note: Fei Xiaotong, who completed his Ph.D. at the London School of Economics in 1938, is seen as the founder of modern sociology in China. Several of his most important works are available in English translation.

[11] Translator's note: "Beida," short for Beijing Daxue, is how virtually all Chinese people refer to Peking University in conversation.

[12] Translator's note: According to the sociologist Gary Hamilton, who translated Fei's *From the Soil*, Fei "claims that, in Western societies, individuals form organizations, whereby each organizations has its own boundaries defining who is part of the organization and who is not, and the relation of each individual to the organization is the same. All members in an organization are equivalent. He calls this an 'organizational mode of association' (*tuantigeju**). In China, on the contrary, each individual is claimed to be surrounded by a series of concentric circles, produced by one's own social influence. Each web of social relations has a self as its center. Each circle spreading out from the center becomes more distant and at the same time more insignificant. Everyone's circles are interrelated, and one touches different circles at different times and places. On different occasions, one's own social network comes into contact with someone else's. He calls this mode of organization a 'differential mode of association' (*chaxugeju**). A practical consequence of this difference in social networking is that, in the West, people struggle for their rights, while in China, people seek connections in higher places and do things for the sake of friendship. Another consequence is that, in China, private selfishness is justified by moving toward the state: both public officials and private persons use the same conception of the social order to define the context of their action. This is different from a Western society, in which public and private rights and obligations belong to a different 'organization' and are divided distinctly. A 'differential mode of association' does not allow for individual rights to be an issue at all, and social morality makes sense only

concept itself doesn't mean much, because "differential mode of association" is nothing more than an empirical translation of traditional Chinese ethical philosophy. I also wonder how generalizable it is—when did the "differential mode of association" become a universal phenomenon in Chinese society? Things could not always have been that way; it must have been the product of a certain set of land relationships, agricultural methods, economic developments, or political changes. How did the "differential mode" evolve in history? Are there regional variations? None of this is clear, so the "differential mode of association" became an ideal type. And because it is an ideal type, everybody can apply it to all sorts of different empirical data.

Here's how I understand it. When Fei Xiaotong proposed the idea of a "differential mode of association," he was in fact responding to a critical political debate at the time, which was the question of whether party politics could work in China. Fei was like Liang Shuming* (1893– 1988),[13] both of whom thought that party politics would not work in China. Fei thought that party politics requires a certain cultural basis, what he called community or group associations, by which he meant the same kind of people joining together on the basis of shared political ideas, which would lead to the formation of groups, and then ideologies, in which the relationships of the people in the groups would be equal, after which democratic elections would choose the leaders of political parties. Fei believed that the Chinese people were unable to form political parties in the modern sense, and his idea of "differential modes of association" was in fact a response to those advocating the democratic system. Understood in this sense, Fei's idea has a specific meaning in the context of these debates. But people pay absolutely no attention to this now, and use the concept as a sort of mechanical description of Chinese social relations. Fei Xiaotong was an ambitious man, his observations were a reply to a certain political question, or an ethical question, which is not the same thing as the specialized, technically oriented research. If we want to make proper

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in terms of the personal connections." See https://www.china-europa-forum.net/bdfdoc-160_en.html [sic].

[13] Translator's note: Liang Shuming was a professor at Peking University and a leading intellectual during the Republican period, probably best known for his influential volume *Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies* (1921). Liang was also active in the "rural reconstruction movement" which sought to rebuild China's countryside.

use of his theoretical innovations, we have to return to the background that produced them, and understand the problems he was trying to solve.

My gentry disposition may have something to do with my grandfather's sense of being content with being alone as a "fallen noble." This is why I have always been suspicious of intellectuals. A little distance, a little suspicion can be pretty important, otherwise when you go to university it's easy to get caught up in other people's discourses.

Wu Qi: If the seeds of suspicion were planted when you were young, given your university education and all your subsequent training, have the suspicions gone away?

Xiang Biao: I think they are stronger than ever, but there was a time, especially right after I finished my Ph.D., when I thought that the sense of distance was created by my own lack of ability, because I didn't understand what other people were saying and had a hard time fitting in. I felt inadequate, like I needed to catch up, which created a lot of pressure. I struggled for a long time. Looking back on it now, when I'm more comfortable and things are going well, I think it was my sense of distance that got me here.

The 1980s Culture Craze

Wu Qi: What did you spend most of your time on in high school? What books did you read?

   Xiang Biao: High school was a pretty important time for me, and I'd like to give a shout out to my school, Wenzhou High School. It was only after I got to Peking University that I learned that high schools in many places go from 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning all the way to 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon, with self-study at school in the evenings, but at my school, everything was over by 3:00 or 4:00, and there was no such thing as self-study at school at night. After school was over, we would watch movies or go shopping. We had a lot of free time and the pressure of exams was not too bad. It might be that at that time the salaries of the high school teachers were not linked to the percentage of students that went on to university, so they just gave normal classes and did not get carried away. At the time, there were all kinds of clubs for students with different

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Translator's note: The 1980s were marked by a series of "crazes" or "enthusiasms" generally interpreted as responses to the regimentation and extreme politicization of Chinese life during the Mao era. The "culture craze" reflected a preoccupation with both Western and Chinese cultures, topics that were newly available in the relatively liberal post-Mao era, after having been more or less taboo between 1949 and 1976.

interests, like the literature society, the drama club, the computer club, the biology club… I was an active participant in arts festivals.

My time in high school also coincided with the final part of the Culture Craze. One thing that had a fairly big impact on me was the magazine the *Wenhui Monthly**, put out by the Shanghai Writers' Association*. I read every issue from cover to cover, and I remember clearly that the address of the editor's office was 149 Yuanmingyuan Road in Shanghai. My favorite was long-form reportage. Long-form reportage was a major thing for Chinese literature and for the Chinese revolution. This kind of writing has a number of important characteristics. One is that it focuses on life at the grassroots level, another is that it is direct, and yet another is that it goes deep. This is true beginning with Xia Yan's* 1935 piece on "Indentured Workers*,"[1] and continuing through Jia Lusheng* and Gao Jianguo's* 1988 *Drifting with the Beggars' Gang**…[2]

Another magazine I read all the time was *Appreciation of Masterpieces**, which was literary criticism. Every issue was really thick and it was hopelessly overwritten and pretentious, extremely abstract, but I thought it was fun, although I'm not sure what influence it had on me. I also read some things on "thought enlightenment,"[3] and ran across some discussions on the young Marx's "alienation,"[4] which talked about social development from the angle of "human liberation" instead of from perspectives of political economy, which I liked a lot.

Another big thing that happened in my family in the 1980s was that for Teachers Day in 1986, the Wenzhou bureau of education gave the

[1] Translator's note: Xia Yan (1900–1995) is considered the founder of reportage literature in China. "Indentured Workers" explores the life of workers in various factories in Shanghai in the 1930s and the various forms of exploitation they suffered.

[2] Translator's note: The authors spent several months living with groups of beggars in several Chinese cities to compose this work.

[3] Translator's note: A group of Chinese intellectuals called for a 'new Enlightenment' (*xin qimeng**) in the late 1980s. The magazine *New Enlightenment*, launched in October 1988, was representative of this trend. Just like the "old" Enlightenment of the May Fourth Movement in 1919 that denounced traditional Chinese culture, the new Enlightenment aimed to radically rethink socialist system and ideology.

[4] Translator's note: "Alienation" was a theme much discussed in the early 1980s, as intellectuals both inside the Party and out sought to understand how something like the Cultural Revolution could have occurred. In the Marxist context, "alienation" means that something has fundamentally changed its nature, becoming a source of oppression. Those in favor of the idea were attempting to rescue Marxism by returning to Marx's original "humanism." The Party ultimately rejected this approach.

school where my father worked a ration coupon for a color television set. Everybody drew lots for it, and my father won. At the time, you couldn't buy a color television even if you had the money. My parents didn't have much money at the time and thought about not using the coupon. One of our relatives said that giving it away would be like giving your luck to other people, so they borrowed some money and bought the television. This shows that when people are trying to talk themselves into something, they will use abstract ideas or principles, like the idea of not letting good luck go. In 1984, my family bought an electric fan, which was our second electric appliance. The first was a light bulb hanging from the ceiling, which I think we had even before I was born.

Wu Qi: Why do you remember those details so clearly?

Xiang Biao: They were a really big deal. When you got home, the fan was on the table blowing air on you, and it could even oscillate. The kind of happiness this gave you in the summer was revolutionary.

Wu Qi: Were the 1980s also the moment of your individual enlightenment?

Xiang Biao: The period between the ages of 16 and 18 was crucial. I started to read, and to give critical speeches at school. I also did my first "fieldwork" during the 1980s, thanks again to my high school.

In the first year of high school, our politics teacher took us to Yueqing county for a fieldwork trip. Now it's Liushi Township in Yueqing city, one of the pioneering places in terms of the production of electrical appliances in China, as well as my mother's hometown. We went to a factory to hear the manager give a report, but the students were goofing around, and the manager got mad, and said to them in dialect "how can I talk with you making so much noise?!" I was the only one listening, and I felt for the manager. We were staying in a guest house, and I noticed that the person at the front desk was always building circuit boards. I asked her where the circuit boards came from, and she said that they were contracted out from private companies run by relatives of hers. Then I asked her how much she made for each circuit board, and found out that she made more doing that than from her wages at the guest house, but that it wasn't a stable income. I asked a few more questions until I understood things clearly, and then wrote a little something about it, saying that private enterprises, working through family connections, were spreading economic opportunity throughout the entire village. At the time, there was a debate in society over the question of whether the private economy would lead to economic polarization. On the basis of this example, I made

the speculative conclusion that there would be no polarization, because the opportunity to make money would be distributed among everyone's relatives, spreading wealth throughout the region. I was proud of my little report. In fact, that observation had an impact later on when I was doing my research on Zhejiang village.[5] It allowed me to see that a small enterprise is a network and not an organization. In other words, an enterprise is first a kinship organization or a social organization, and is an economic organization only in a secondary sense.

I was never all that attracted to the intellectual enlightenment of the 1980s, and later I liked it less and less. It might be a question of style. I remember clearly that the actor Zhang Jiasheng's* (b. 1935) narration of "River Elegy," the tone of which put me off, and there was also the last half of the journalist Qian Gang's* (b. 1953) reportage on "The Great Tangshan Earthquake"[6] that was broadcast on the radio, which I didn't like either. It was like some kind of religious language like they were praying for all of humanity. Life in Wenzhou was completely different. When I was in high school, my mother was teaching math in a different middle school. One of her students got into university, and the parents invited everyone for a banquet. And somebody had the nerve to say to the student, to his face, "What's the point of going to university these days?" The student felt a little awkward and unhappy. Wenzhou is a pragmatic place, without much time for pretention. If going to university can't bring you tangible benefits, then there is no point of going to university no matter how nice it sounds.

Wu Qi: It looks like Wenzhou High School was quite special. Did it always have this kind of tradition? Or was it the result of reform and opening?

Xiang Biao: Wenzhou High School is relatively old. It was established by a member of the local gentry, Sun Yirang* (1848–1908), who had done research on oracle bones. Well-known Republican period writers like Zhu Ziqing* (1898–1948) and Zheng Zhenduo* (1898–1958) both taught there. During the chaos of the Republican period (1911–1949), when Beijing was a mess and Shanghai was a place for the foreigners and the rich, a lot of literary types wound up in Zhejiang. In the old days,

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[5] Translator's note: See the discussion in the introduction.

[6] Translator's note: The Tangshan earthquake struck Tangshan, Hebei on July 28, 1976, causing massive destruction and the loss of at least 242,000 lives.

the high school was the pinnacle of local education, and was rooted in the local environment. Now high schools are basically feeders, sending students to Beijing and Shanghai to study, and even local universities have their eyes fixed on the world outside of China, so the atmosphere is completely different from what it was when it was set up by local gentry. In the early period, the high school even played an important role in the revolution. I didn't know whether this had to with its history, all I knew was that Wenzhou High School was a key school, and my teachers were all relatively mature and it seemed that they had been transferred from elsewhere. They had all lived through the Cultural Revolution, and took education seriously, but there was no notion of any target to make sure a certain number of students went on to university, like what high schools are doing now.

Maybe the reason that the pretentious tone came to be mainstream within the cultural world, despite its distance from real life, is due to the fact that schools became such strange, inorganic places. There is something worth discussing here, which is how we evaluate the 1980s. The feelings that inspired the elevated tone with which everyone spoke in the 1980s might still have a considerable impact. We are always saying that China needs its own social thought, its own discourse; where does this come from? The development of American social science has a lot to do with 1968, which is when new theories began to emerge, aiming to confront social problems. France was even more like this. The student movement was an empty revolution but it changed everything, and their tone was quite elevated as well, but they remained connected to actual life, and produced a good number of theorists. This intellectual production did not come from the social scientists themselves, but from their links to philosophers and artists. And there were many enterprises and technical people allied with them, so that they could bring things to life and create a new atmosphere.

China in the 1980s looked like America or France in the 1960s, in that it was a period of awakening and questioning. So I would have thought that the 1980s was bound to produce a good number of impressive people because all of the resources were there to stimulate thinking. The students involved in the demonstrations in 1989 had had an uninterrupted education when they were young, went to Peking University, and then lived through many things in the eye of the storm of history. Later on, in the wake of the suppression, some of these people went to the United States and France, with generous scholarships, and saw how things were

in the West. But to my mind, none of these people came up with interesting ideas. Of course, they should not be blamed for that; they were after all investing their youths and their lives into their ideals. But their experience gives us something to think about: why did these people not come up with ideas? From my perspective, it seems to me that when your emotional tone is pitched too high, it is easy to go to extremes. This shows that I have been influenced a fair bit by the scholar Wang Hui*[7] (b. 1959), when he said that the reason that neoliberal reforms were so easily introduced into China in the 1990s was that the 1980s had left no resources to help us to reflect on social contradictions. Everyone felt like Deng Xiaoping's 1992 Southern Tour,[8] with its "Eastern Wind that Brings the Promise of Spring," was like a revolution, that by letting go and promoting freedom, every problem would be solved, but they didn't know enough about concrete problems like inequality and social justice. Intellectuals at the time did not truly look into the hardships of the common people, or social contradictions. They looked up at abstractions instead of down at practical problems.

Wu Qi: What you said about the different situations in various countries after the social movements is interesting. In every society, even where there was no thorough-going revolution, social movements still brought about transformative changes in many places. We have talked a fair bit about the role of intellectuals prior to and during social movements, but we have talked less about how they work after a large social movement is over. I wonder if you could compare a bit more concretely what happened in China with what happened in the United States, France, or other countries?

Xiang Biao: The problem in the United States at the time was very real. The whole movement had a direct focus: people didn't want to go to war in Vietnam and began rethinking the nature of the state. This

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[7] Translator's note: Wang Hui is one of contemporary China's most prominent public intellectuals, and a leading member of China's New Left, which seeks in various ways to insist on the continuing importance of socialism to China and the world.

[8] Translator's note: Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour marked the moment that China relaunched it policies of reform and opening, after a period of repression and hesitation in the wake of the suppression of the Tian'anmen protests in 1989. Deng's talk was first publicized in *Shenzhen Special Zone News** on March 26, 1992, with the title "The Eastern Wind Brings the Promise of Spring". The report was then widely reprinted across China.

was not merely a job for intellectuals but had a strong mass component as well. Things were more abstract in France. There, things were basically about the desire for freedom, but this was enough for young people and had long-lasting impacts on art and music. Later on, Foucault also said that 1968 was not anti-government, but rather was opposing a certain way of thinking. There were true feelings behind this; the French felt that the kind of regimented life forced on them by the bureaucratic and market system was meaningless. Sartre's existentialism as well as Foucault's theories of power were closely related to the mood of the time.

The experience of Chinese intellectuals was also clear. Having lived through the 1960s and the 1970s, intellectuals wanted freedom, felt that human nature had been distorted and that they should embrace universal values like the rest of the world. But the experience of the intellectuals was far from that of the grassroots people in China. I think intellectuals may have made a mistake when they equated the people's distaste for official corruption and inflation at the time with a dislike of the socialist system itself. People at the grassroots level of course wanted stable prices and hated corruption, but they weren't talking about individual freedom.

Scholars from Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s should be closer to us, and I hope to be able to study them some day. The way Yugoslavia turned out is a tragedy, for which the West is largely responsible. The current narrative is that the disintegration of the country was inevitable because it had always been composed of different ethnic groups, held together only by the Soviet Union. Which leads me to ask: at the time, those different ethnic groups were living in a country with one of the highest welfare standards in the world, a high standard of living, and flourishing art and culture; is this not a goal we should strive for? If everyone lets go of their so-called cultural and ethnic differences in favor of a common good life, is this not a good thing?

One thing that I admire Western scholars for is their self-reflection. The strongest critics of Western society come from within the West, and we relied on Western literature to understand what happened during the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The US government and German banks had a lot to do with it, by encouraging certain people to split off first, and then the Yugoslavian military was not strong enough to fight back, and a series of economic problems followed, including serious inflation— just like Venezuela today—so that if you made the slightest error, your adversaries cut you to pieces. I haven't been to any part of the former

Yugoslavia, but from what I've read in Western media, the situation is not good. I know that several formerly socialist East European countries are among the handful of countries in the world that are implementing a fixed tax system, which means that whether you earn one hundred dollars a month or 20,000 dollars a month, you pay the same tax, while most places in the world use a progressive tax system. This is a kind of extreme neoliberalism that even the West dares not put into practice.

Beida After 1989

Wu Qi: Our past life experience sometimes merely has a random influence on us, and it is hard to identify any one-on-one correspondence. But when you get to university, you should be entering a more orderly, clear-headed period. You already mentioned your sense of distance and distrust. Did this continue while you were at Beida? If so, how did it manifest itself? Did you feel like you didn't fit in with your classmates?

Xiang Biao: At Beida, I was careful in how I dealt with other people, so I did not feel like I was being excluded in my daily life, but the feeling of distance was still there. At Beida, you have students who are 18 or 19 years old, all of whom are excellent students who have come from different places, and most of them are interested in seeking recognition and approval, especially from officials, but I remember thinking that I did not understand why they thought that was important. Of course, there were quite a few people we called "loners," but I wasn't one of them either, because I worked hard at my studies, and was involved in activities and clubs. I talked a lot and did not mind the limelight. Others saw me as someone who was ambitious, who had a goal, different from those who were just enjoying their life.

The military training of the 1990 Beida Freshman class for a year at Shijiazhuang was a formative experience.[1] Although I didn't realize it at first, talking with upper-level students later on I came to understand that it had a great influence on us. In my case, it had two particular impacts. One was that I realized that a rigidly hierarchical system warps your personality. Kids who are 17 or 18 years old generally look for friends and have all sorts of innocent ideas, but when they are in a hierarchical situation, everyone is constantly thinking about self-preservation, how to ingratiate yourself with the squad commander, or the assistant squad commander, or even the cook. In fact, the stakes were not all that high, and if you didn't suck up to people there was no real danger, so it was a kind of supra-rational calculation. There were also horizontal relationships as well, because we were classmates, after all, and once we got back to campus, everyone became good friends. But the overall feeling was that vertical relations were in control, and the feeling of oppression was acute.

Later on, when I was in Britain I met all sorts of people, including some retired military, and learned that in British colonial history, the links between military service, education, and social status were quite close, which is also true in China. In the twentieth century, wars completely upended the social hierarchy in many places. People say that Japan modernized itself on the basis of the ruins of the war, and that it was a miracle, but you can think about it from another perspective, which was that because of the war, landlords had to contribute their land and their sons had to join the army, and once the war was over everything was in ruins, which meant that people were all equal, and soldiers returning home after the war had to be properly taken care of, no matter what their prewar status had been. This fostered the growth of universal education and welfare. When I went to visit my wife's ancestral home in Onomichi, I remarked to her that the location of the house was perfect, with an elementary school on one side and a high school on the other. In fact, the land on which the huge campuses of these schools are situated originally belonged to her family. Her grandfather had pneumonia and could not join the army, so he contributed land to the state, keeping only a

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[1] Translator's note: For a few years following the Tian'anmen protests in 1989, the freshman class at Peking University did not attend class at the university, but instead at an army base in Shijiazhuang, about three hours to the south of the capital. Peking University students had been leaders of the protests, and the idea was to instill discipline through the military experience.

parcel for himself to live on. Modernization only happens when everyone pitches in, thus this was different from the militaristic modernization of the Meiji era and was more democratic.

Britain is also like this, in that if the war had not broken the power of the upper class, the act of parliament establishing the National Health Service would never have passed, nor would we have seen the socialist-leaning society like that of 1968. Of course, I do not mean to valorize war, but if old structures are not destroyed, new ones do not grow. This process is also influenced by the army. Physical education is very important in the British educational system, and even more so in the United States. A British veteran told me that the most important thing they learned in physical training at school—training modeled on what they did in the army—was how to protect their teammates. They said that when you enter the battlefield in groups of five or six, life and death are intimately linked, and only if group members protect one another will they survive, so they have to coordinate their actions and create an emotional pact to live or die together. This is the only way to survive in war, so they try to instill this ethos every day. This is even more important in the aristocratic tradition, and they believe this is an important part of the elite character, that they understand how to take care of one another and build a spirit of teamwork.

This is completely different from my personal experience with military training. This has to do with an important political issue, which is that the character and the role of the army can be completely different. When we went to the military camp for our first year at university, the Chinese army was no longer at war, and its principal role was training, so it had lost its original positive military tradition, becoming a mechanical organization in which obedience was all that mattered. So the first thing I noticed at the camp was how frightening the hierarchy was. After I got back to Beida, I wasn't so eager to receive the approval of any system. Second, the entire experience of military training made us all extremely calculating. For instance, we were very careful how we spent our time. Our professors were quite surprised by this and said that students who had gone through military training all got up early and went to the library without wasting time, and there were many fewer "loners" than there once were. In fact, this has to do with hierarchy.

Why is it that after the collapse of communism, Eastern European societies became so coldly utilitarian, so oriented toward money? Their market economies were not like those of mature market economies.

Take Germany as an example, one of the most long-standing capitalist economies. Germany has long practiced a "social market economy" model, which emphasizes competition and the spirit of individual entrepreneurship, while at the same time also emphasizing state intervention in the market order and the welfare system. Alongside this there also exists a deeply Christian tradition with clear ideas about how to treat other people in the marketplace, how to act when you fail, what kind of success is praiseworthy, and what kind of success is shameful. What followed the collapse of communism was naked capitalism, a capitalism that only cared about success and failure, and made no distinction between praiseworthy successes and shameful successes. Judgment was completely focused on the bottom line so that in the case of success achieved through shameful means, you could be even more boastful than if you had succeeded in normal ways because it shows you are clever and daring. When the right reemerged in Hungary and Romania, it was a reaction to this kind of utilitarian market economy. An important reason for all of this is that in the original centralized, extremely hierarchical system, there was no space for people to probe fundamental questions related to their life experiences because all resources were distributed from top to bottom. I realized while in military training that if I got on well with my platoon commander and my company commander, then I was all set in material terms for the next week, which meant that we were constantly worried about how to please them, which in turn made us anxious.

The hierarchical system truly did destroy a more innocent understanding of self. The early period of reform in China was not like this. Early reform in China started in the villages when the commune system was still playing a positive role. There were still collective feelings attached to town and village enterprises; everybody wanted to make money, but it wasn't that pronounced yet. But after reform started in the cities, social contradictions multiplied, and the utilitarianism that emerged from the original hierarchical work unit system looked a lot like what we see in Eastern Europe.

This had quite an impact on my mood when I was 17 or 18. As you said, a lot of things happen at random, and having a year's "seasoning" as a random experience became something that was hard to get rid of. Even if you want to let go of it, it takes a lot of effort.

Truly, not letting go is a problem for me, a huge obstacle in my research. If you don't let up, then you don't let your mind wander, which

can wind up limiting your creativity. I have this problem when I do field-work. I don't relax and goof around, and am not good at blending in with everyone else, which is something I would like to improve about myself. Of course, this has to do with how I was raised, because I was always with my grandfather, and did not often play with children my own age. This was because the children my own age in his neighborhood were children of dock workers. I remember that if the neighbors gave me something to eat, he would pretend to be polite and accept it, but then would not let me eat it because he said it wasn't clean. He could be two-faced: very polite to strangers while he perhaps actually looked down on them, and this had an effect on me as well. When I wanted to go to play at someone's house, my grandfather said no, and told me that it might cause trouble for them, because even though they said I was welcome this might not be what they were really thinking. This kind of suspiciousness cast quite a shadow on me, which has lasted to this day. My wife and I are completely different. Her personality is the type that thinks that if other people see that she's happy, then they'll be happy too, so when she wants to do something, she just does it. I always think about the negative consequences first.

Wu Qi: At the time did you ever think about trying to change your personality?

Xiang Biao: I didn't realize it while I was at the university. I discovered it while doing field research.

Wu Qi: Usually when you're at the university, everyone is in a hurry to decide what kind of person they are going to become because there is no one clear path forward. Especially after I got to Beida, my feeling was that it was even more confusing, because there were all kinds of classmates, some who were ace students and bookworms, some were gamers, some were into the arts, and some were into student politics or clubs. But in your memory, it seems as if you were set on becoming an intellectual, and you didn't need to choose. Maybe this is because your parents were both teachers? Or was this a common thing when you were at university?

Xiang Biao: I think this was more or less natural for me, and academic work was exactly what I wanted to do. My parents didn't really under-stand my choice of major. I did not go through the university examination but had guaranteed admission,[2] which meant that I could choose any

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[2] Translator's note: "Guaranteed admission" is practiced by many top universities in China. They cooperate with secondary schools to choose a small number of the best

subject as my major without worrying about whether the subject is too popular and whether my score is high enough. My first choice was political science, but my parents said "absolutely not"—anything but politics. Their recommendations were first, economics, and second, law because they thought I was a good speaker since I gave a lot of talks in high school. I said these two majors were boring because everything was already decided and you just had to apply the rules, a view that was of course very superficial. At the time, everything interesting that I read had to do with politics, but when I talked about it with my high school classmates, they all said that politics is dirty and wondered if I could be like that. So I finally chose sociology. At the time I had surely heard Fei Xiaotong's name, but I did not know his research. After I got to Beida, I didn't pay that much attention to what other people were doing, because I knew what I wanted to do.

Wu Qi: What were your main anxieties at the time?

Xiang Biao: I really didn't like the courses in the sociology department. After I started my first-year classes, I wrote my mother a letter, and told her that the courses had absolutely nothing to do with real life. There was one new course called "social work," which was full of concepts from Hong Kong, and I found it really boring. My mother wrote back, and I still remember it, saying that when she was young, China followed the Soviet Union in everything, and now we were following the West in everything, and this was a problem. Reading her letter gave me a theoretical framework with which to criticize the curriculum at the time.

I spent a weekend—two nights—under the light of my own table lamp (I have a good head for money. I brought 600 RMB with me when I first came to Beijing, but did not take any more of my family's money later on, and instead relied on writing essays or various other things to make money, so I was relatively well-off and bought my own lamp), and wrote a lengthy letter entitled "A Number of Suggestions Regarding the Design of the Curriculum," which I then gave to Wang Sibin* (b. 1949), the Department Chair. I told him that my intention was not to say that the department should reform things in the way I suggested, but that it might serve as a reference point to shine a light on certain problems. Professor Wang got all excited, and in a departmental meeting talked about the multi-page letter he had received from a student and had all

students whom they recruit directly, thus circumventing the grueling exams through which all other students in China attempt to enter university.

the faculty members read it. They thought it was great that there were students thinking like this. This encouraged me a lot. If they had criticized me at that point, I might have been less confident later on. That was the first time I wrote up what was bothering me about what was going on. This spirit seems to be less prevalent now, which is really too bad.

Wu Qi: What were your principal complaints in the letter about how the professors were teaching?

Xiang Biao: All Beida professors are excellent. When we started university, the first group of young professors whose education had not been affected by the Cultural Revolution had just finished their degrees, and they gave the first-year classes. Professors from the Educated Youth generation[3] like Wang Hansheng* (1952–2015) and Sun Liping* (b. 1953) basically dealt with graduate students and did not have much contact with us. The professors who taught the other undergraduate courses were teachers who were bookish and had little understanding of society, and my feeling was that they were not interested in what was happening in society.

There was something else that surprised me. Later on, when I went to do fieldwork outside of Beijing in the 2000s, I would usually first seek out professors from a local university and talk with them about the local situation, because they had written articles about it. But when I started to talk with them, I discovered that aside from reproducing what they read in the news, they did not really know what was happening around them. I thought this very strange. You live here every day, so how can you not know? But they weren't interested in this, and their articles on the subject were very empty, and contained no concrete observations. I eventually learned that if you want to find professors in China who are familiar with the local situation, you'll find them in the bigger, better, older schools in Beijing and Shanghai. Teachers in most local schools have little interest in what is going on around them, and just copy whatever they read in academic journals in the hopes of being part of that discourse system. They agree that it is a huge problem, but they are still not interested, so you can see how serious the disconnect is. This means that academic language is often completely meaningless.

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[3] Translator's note: The "Educated Youth" generation refers to those who were sent to live among the peasants during the Cultural Revolution, many for several years.

At the time some Beida professors were also like this, and I thought their teaching was lifeless, that they were just repeating what was in the textbook. I talked about it with an upperclassman, and he said we should find a weak spot, meaning that we should boycott the class of a problematic but meek teacher first, which is what we did. There was one professor who was getting on in years, who could barely give his class, and only two or three students showed up for each lecture. He was not confident with the students and was probably upset to see that they did not come, but there was nothing he could do about it. So, I just stopped going altogether. We could do this thanks to Beida, because at the time they did not take attendance and there were no tests, and in a lot of classes you just wrote an essay at the end. After sophomore year, I was serious about learning academic English, because I thought it was practical, and I also went to economics class, but the rest of the time I spent on my Zhejiang Village research, as well as on clubs and activities.

See, when people like me talk about youth, it is really easy to get caught up in memories and nostalgia. The importance of youth is not in our remembering our own experiences, but rather in using the perspective of today's young people to ask hard questions of ourselves. "Passing judgment" on ourselves is the only way to get at something real, and the only real way to think about our past experience. Movies like "Youth"[4] are not terribly important in my view. Remembering your youth like that idealizes and romanticizes your experience, making it into something very pure, although we do not seem to be pure now. We should not judge solely on the basis of purity.

Wu Qi: The fact that you could boycott classes back then means that the entire atmosphere was quite relaxed.

Xiang Biao: The fact that things were relaxed has an important context. As I already mentioned, we started university in 1990 and spent the first year at a military academy in Shijiazhuang. When we got to Beida in 1991, the whole political atmosphere was ambiguous and uncertain. For example, despite the long and rich history of public lectures at Beida, the only public lecture for the entering class was an "English for Reading" lecture given by the professor who had written the textbook for fourth-year English. The class was given in a big lecture hall. It was freezing cold,

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[4] Translator's note: "Youth" is a 2017 movie that chronicles the lives of a group of idealistic adolescents in a military art troupe in the People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution.

and everyone went in their military overcoats. At the time, no one dared say anything, and everyone studied to get ahead, but it was not a happy year.

In 1992, I remember the morning distinctly, I came out of Dorm 28 at 7:00 a.m. to the sound of the loudspeakers addressing the entire campus, as the news broadcast from China National Radio accompanied us on our way to breakfast, and the woman announcer was reciting "The Eastern Wind Brings the Promise of Spring," which was the report from the *Shenzhen Special Zone News* concerning the speech Deng Xiaoping made on his Southern Tour announcing the return to reform and opening. The central authorities had not allowed this to be reported, but once it was, things changed at the top, and they started promoting the story.[5] I remember it vividly because "The Eastern Wind Brings the Promise of Spring" was a line that I had never heard before. Overnight, the atmosphere changed completely.

What is interesting is that there started to be a lot more public lectures given, and many were about marketing strategy. In 1991, there were already students who decided to plunge into the market to make money, but this exploded in 1992 when people started to think that the market economy would become the norm. All sorts of cultural activities got rolling again, including, for example, another wave of "national studies."*[6] I was active, and as president of the sociology club, I asked people to give public lectures, and everybody was all excited. There was a lot of space, and the professors didn't pay much attention to us. The university also started to make money. The Beida Party Secretary started to build the Beida Resource Building, as well as the Resource Group for Beida as a whole.[7] "Resource" is one of the first concepts I learned at

[5] Translator's note: Although Deng was the supreme leader, his Southern speech was not reported by major media such as the *People's Daily* initially because central authorities remained divided regarding economic reform at that time. This explains why a minor newspaper in Shenzhen was the first to publicize the speech.

[6] Translator's note: "National studies (*guoxue*)," a term coined in the early twentieth century, has taken on a variety of forms and meanings over the years, all grounded in the basic notion that China and the Chinese tradition are worthy of study, perhaps uniquely so. The idea expresses a resistance to the overwhelming Westernization of virtually all fields of knowledge.

[7] Translator's note: The Beida Resource Building was a building on campus that was rented out for profit. The Beida resource group was a state-owned, university-run, commercial company focusing on real estate development.

Beida. What does it mean? It means that with the privatization of the market economy, the things we originally needed to survive are now transformed into potential assets that can appreciate in value. You have to assert your hold on resources, and possess a clear title to them. Beida used to be a school that organized its daily activities, but now they discovered that the school had resources, with which they could run classes and build buildings. This was the beginning of a big transformation, the "resourcification" of the university. I find the idea of "resource" rather intriguing, and I was not at all critical at the outset, and in fact all of us thought that it was a good thing. I found it stimulating in a theoretical sense as well, because I could use this perspective to observe how people deployed resources in their daily lives. Wenzhou people grow up thinking of resource deployment, so I was perhaps more sensitive to it.

Wu Qi: Your father kept a record of the essays you wrote in school. But there was no Internet at the time, so we can't find most of them. What kind of things did you write when you were at university?

Xiang Biao: The first essay I wrote at Beida was called "The Third Mr." When I first got to Beida, an upper-class student in sociology was putting together a newspaper and invited the new students to write something. I always liked to show off, so I wrote the piece. Everyone had always said that the May Fourth spirit at Beida was basically about "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy,"[8] but I said that there was a third figure, called "Mr. Morality," or "Mr. New Morality." I thought the moral question was critical too, and should not be forgotten. In part, I was repeating what other people were saying at the time, emphasizing how technical and institutional changes led to cultural changes. At the same time, I also wanted to stress that morality should not be like a hat that we put on, overshadowing our lives from above. For today's morality, we need to hold the hat in our hands and take a good look at it. We can't see the hat on our head, even if we can feel it, but we don't know its shape or its color, and in the same way, if we don't know where our morality comes from, and simply follow it unthinkingly, then we are just following along blindly. It is immoral to ask other people to respect that kind of morality. The idea of "Mr. Morality" is to say that morality should be a matter of choice, based on individual freedom. I surely read about this somewhere;

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[8] Translator's note: Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), a leading figure in the May Fourth/New Culture Movement and the co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, famously called for "Mr. Confucius" to be replaced by "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy."

it might have been left over from my "culture craze" readings during high school. And I truly felt that morality should be the result of empirical observation and analysis and not just lazy dogmatism. Being anti-dogma, anti-system, anti-intellectual, anti-elite also impacts on the language you use to write, which we can talk about later.

When Marx talked about the question of theft—actually Proudhon said something similar even earlier—Marx asked why it was seen as immoral. First, private property is the precondition for theft's being immoral, because in the absence of private property the question would not exist. In Marx's analysis, picking up or pulling off branches from trees in a forest was seen as theft because the land belongs to the manor, which means that the trees belong to the manor as well, as well as the leaves and branches that fall from the trees—there is no end to this. There is a historical evolution concerning the conditions under which theft was labeled as immoral. Another example is the relationship between family and corruption, which also requires us to carry out an empirical analysis of morality. Why is it that everyone thinks we can be more forgiving of corruption if it is done for the sake of one's children? At the same time, when we expose cases of official corruption, our focus is often on sexual relations, and we pay scant attention to the nature of the corruption, how the system facilitated the corruption, or what concrete consequences the corruption produced. Morality is multi-dimensional, so why do we accord one dimension more weight than another? When the President of Peking University knelt before his aging mother, and the pictures of the event went viral,[9] the effect on young people was really bad, because his actions suddenly confronted them with an unnatural, mysterious kind of morality, not only giving them no choice, but taking away their basic feelings about what is moral and what is not. I think that when I wrote that essay I was talking about the new morality proposed during the May Fourth period, which was meant to be the product of rational reflection and individual freedom. Morality without choice is immoral, and morality that is forced on you is even worse because when I force my morality on you, it means that I am thoroughly denying your humanity at an implicit level and that if you don't accept my morality, then in my eyes you are not a person.

[9] Translator's note: Peking University President Zhou Qifeng (b. 1947) made an extended display of filial piety on the occasion of his mother's 90th birthday on July 15, 2012. His display was filmed and went viral on social media, leading to criticism that Zhou's "performance" was exaggerated and improper.

Researching Zhejiang Village

Wu Qi: In these interviews we will not go into detail concerning your well-known research and arguments, for example your work on Zhejiang Village, that you did while you were at Beida, or your doctoral dissertation on "Global Body Shopping,"[1] as well as certain debates and criticisms that can be found in the Sinophone world, even if all of this will serve as grist for the mill, the basis on which I hope to push the discussion forward. But your six years research on Zhejiang Village must have been a turning point, both in terms of your research work and your personal life. At the time did you have any inkling or awareness of this? Where did the original idea come from and what motivated you?

  Xiang Biao: Of course, I had no idea! I was only 20 at the time and had no idea of "what all this might mean later on." The things you do when you are young are either because someone told you to, and everyone is doing the same thing, or it's just the opposite, and you decide to do your own thing, and consciously follow your impulse. Everyone has impulses, so the key point is not whether you have them, but whether you follow them. Things that have truly changed history, whether we are talking about history writ large or your own personal history, are often the result of following your impulses. Plans based on historical calculations often wind up not having much of an impact. This is the miraculous

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[1] Translator's note: See the introduction for a discussion of Xiang Biao's research on Zhejiang Village and global "body shopping".

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thing about life. It surprises you, it makes you feel like life and history have come alive, and it creates opportunities for young people.

My chief motivation at the time was probably to be different from everybody else. Or it was also related to my dissatisfaction with my studies, my feeling that going to class was boring. But the emphasis on fieldwork in the sociology department—fieldwork was seen as sacred by both the professors and my classmates—was also a strong motivating factor. The enjoyment of observation that I had developed as a child probably factored in here as well. Because in fact, lots of students also wanted to do fieldwork, but if you go there and don't see anything or can't spark a conversation with people, then the whole thing gets awkward, and you drop it.

Wu Qi: Did you have a lot of friends at the time? People with whom to discuss things?

Xiang Biao: Not too many. I didn't feel the need to share all that, but I do like to talk, so after my fieldwork, I would organize lectures, which gave me a great sense of accomplishment.

Wu Qi: How was this kind of independent, individual research viewed in the context of Beida at the time? What did the people around you think about it? Did you discuss it with people? Did anyone criticize you?

Xiang Biao: The fact that I kept going on my Zhejiang Village research was also because Beida encouraged me. I was admired. People recognized that it was hard. My professors encouraged me, and later on, the Youth League committee gave me a prize. For a young person, this was really valuable encouragement, and the fact that I could keep going and expanding the project had to do with this climate. Later on, I joined one of Wang Hansheng's research projects, which came with funding support, and for an undergraduate to have research funds was reaffirming and satisfying. All of this was crucial. Because at the time I didn't know where I was going with the project. I would go to Zhejiang Village, and they would be there making clothes, and I didn't know what to ask, and wound up asking what seemed like the same question every time, and they gave the same answers. For the longest time, I wrote nothing with any theory to it. This is a really hard academic topic for an undergraduate. The reason that I was able to keep going was that it became a form of social practice. I had funding, I had encouragement,

and I had a sense of purpose, in that I was participating in their community building, combining it with Beida's Loving Hearts Society.[2] When I wrote up my fieldwork notes, I had no theoretical framework, so each chapter addressed a particular question, and I published some of them in the *Chinese Peasants** magazine, in a small column.

I constantly berated myself for being so deficient in theory. Because at Beida I had no theoretical training, nor did I read a great deal, since I was not a great reader. I felt this way at Beida, and I was even more shocked when I saw how on top of the literature my fellow students at Oxford were. This kind of ability is critical, because most of our information and thinking relies on written words. To tell the truth, when I started teaching at Oxford, I was way below the level of a doctoral student, to say nothing of the level of a professor, way below average. Most people think that in systematic academic training, getting a grasp on the literature is the starting point, the most basic skill, but I actually skipped all that. This is why I stayed at Oxford because if I had tried to go to another school, it might not have been easy to find a job.

My guess is that Oxford thinks that everyone has this skill, and just imagines that you do too, and there are still people who say as much to me now, that I avoided those theories on purpose, in other words, that I knew the theories and purposely did not use them, which puts me at a higher level. In fact, I knew nothing at all about the theories, which is why they don't figure in my work. For these people, I am like a breath of fresh air. But if I had gone to work at a newer university, I would have had to check all those boxes, and would not have made it past the first hurdle.

This has been a weak point of mine for a long time, and I am still struggling with it. I need to catch up, but I cannot let go of who I am and make myself into another kind of person. I can't seem to decide one way or another, so I'm still trying to catch up. We can talk about it again in 20 years.

I think the fact that I read relatively little at Beida and immersed myself in Zhejiang Village, maybe had to do with education at the time. When I was in high school I liked to read and sought out fairly complicated things. If I had continued like that, then with a relatively good undergraduate education, I would have been in good shape, but that is not the

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[2] Translator's note: Beida's first voluntary service club, established in 1993.

environment I wound up in. Reading ability has a lot to do with age, and you need to read with a certain intensity at a certain age to develop the ability. But at that age I did not focus on reading academic literature, so my brain did not get training for that function, and I am still that way, and my relation to the written word is a bit distant. The written word does not get me excited.

Wu Qi: This is another reason that you are at odds with the idea of intellectuals.

Xiang Biao: Exactly! On the one hand, I feel awkward when talking with intellectuals, because everyone has read things that I have not. At the same time, I also feel like some intellectuals live inside their words, and what they say is basically making logical connections between one set of discourse and another, and this can perhaps take us a long way away from the real world. I'm always wondering what facts all those theories correspond to, which is why I am a picky reader. But this might be my strong point as well, in that if there is nothing in the theory that you're selling, I won't be dazzled by the discourse. I always try to "wring" something out of the text, to see what is left after squeezing the water out. This is why I really like old-style *reportage* literature in China, which is totally direct, with no external theorizing, or metaphors, or analogies. My lack of theory also created another big problem, which is that I can't read things that cite a lot of classic texts. If I don't know the classic, then I don't know what it means when they cite it. And of course, citing the classics is an important way that intellectuals and scholars write.

Wu Qi: This is one of the pleasures of this kind of writing, something that this group takes pride in.

Xiang Biao: It's true that citations can make the text appear subtle and sophisticated, and by using them you can engage in dialogues with other people and with the classics, therefore creating an epistemological universe there. But I'm outside of that, and can't get in. I have a friend, Vani, in Singapore, who influenced me a great deal, an Indian. I told her that Joan Baez's music moved me a lot. Baez sings a lot of folk songs, and I know basically nothing about music, but I like her. Vani laughed—she knows me really well—she said that I like Joan Baez because her songs have no references. There are no hidden meanings in the folksongs that you have to figure out. I draw strength from that kind of directness.

So in my years at Beida, I really was quite different from other people. Everybody thinks Beida is about ideas, theories, and scholarship, but for me, it was about freedom, the freedom to hang out in Zhejiang Village.

I also like social activities, so I visited a lot of people, and wrote a lot of letters.

Wu Qi: What kind of letters did you write?

Xiang Biao: I wrote to Tong Dalin* (1918–2010) and Dong Furen* (1927–2004),[3] as well as to some people high up in the Wenzhou government who had been responsible for policymaking. I also went to visit them. After 1992, I wrote to members of what I called the "old elite," who had been influential in the 1980s and had gone abroad to study a couple of years earlier, the most famous of which were the economists Zhou Qiren* (b. 1950), Wang Xiaoqiang* (b. 1952), and Du Ying* (b. 1952)…Later, Justin Yifu Lin* (b. 1952) came to China from Taiwan, and set up the Center for Research on the Chinese Economy*, and I interacted with some of them. There was also Chen Yueguang*, who used to be the associate editor of the "Toward the Future" book series.

Wu Qi: You interacted with them as a student? This didn't happen that much back then, right? Did you learn anything interesting?

Xiang Biao: You're right. One reason all this happened was that we were introduced by my teachers, Wang Hansheng* and Sun Liping. So, my professors mattered a lot, but I was also very keen to meet these people. They taught me some important lessons. They did not talk about theory, and only told stories and talked about their experiences and their insights. They were very direct and down to business. When they talked about things they went straight to the "point," in other words, to the most important guiding force behind whatever they were talking about, a force that often had not been understood before. But they did not seem to have the patience to develop the "point," to make it into a systematic argument. They would talk until they made their point, and then move on to another. They really came up with a lot of propositions that got people excited, but they didn't test them. My article on "The End of the 'Educated Youth' Period in Chinese Social Science" was based on this. Sun Liping is more academic than they are. He has insights that he works out into theories, but their pleasure was truly in those "points." Hanging out with them and getting to know their experiences made me envious, and I felt that they had been able to talk about policy questions in the real world, and to throw themselves into things they really believed in. But

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[3] Translator's note: Both of these are "old revolutionaries" who joined the CCP early on and went on to have important careers as "scholar-officials" in the PRC. Dong Furen at one point promoted the "Wenzhou model" of economic development.

overall, the 1980s did not leave me with many intellectual resources—spiritual resources were more important.

Wu Qi: We'll talk about the 1980s later, but let's go back to the directness that you were talking about, and your lack of theoretical ability. At the time, did Beida professors not test you on reading articles or citing the classics? Didn't the sociology department test you on that?

Xiang Biao: There was no system for that. Wang Hansheng knew about my problem. I remember she talked to me about it once when I was moving into the M.A. program after finishing my undergraduate work. It was in the summer of 1995, and we were at her house. She said that I might feel some pressure as I moved into graduate school. I had a lot of self-confidence at the time, so I asked what kind of pressure. She said that when I started to work with Li Meng*, Zhou Feizhou*, and Li Kang* (they were all a year ahead of me, and knew much more theory), I might feel pressure about theory. Her idea was for me to work harder. Professor Liu Shiding* also encouraged me a lot. He is a very kind person and did not point out my flaws, or criticize me, but he clearly knew about them. One time we were eating together, and he clearly told me that I had clever ideas, but would have a hard time developing them because they weren't engaged with the literature.

It was quite interesting to observe these people at Beida. I talked a lot with another young professor, Yu Changjiang*, who said that one important thing Beida gives you is the ability to not be afraid. No matter where you go, you are not afraid. He might be right.

My fieldwork experience is what I harvested from my early period, which wound up being a big problem, because my undergraduate career was pretty much just that fieldwork, which was something that very few people can do at that stage, but it meant that I did not do what most people do, which is things like reading. So things were sort of upside down. I received some recognition fairly early, not only at school but even internationally, but I ignored some basic elements of my education, which is a sort of stress for me even today. Sometimes I can get really stressed out, and it was a big psychological pressure in the last couple of years.

Last year (2018) in Shanghai, I talked about this with my doctoral advisor, Frank Pieke, who has been very encouraging. When I started talking about it, he understood right away, and said that my fear was that I would never do anything better than what I have already done. Chen Kuan-Hsing*, from Taiwan, was the moderator for a talk I gave in

Singapore, probably in 2003. He was talking about Zhejiang Village, and said that I might never do anything better than that. Of course his point was to praise what I had done, but my thought was "I'm only 31!" But now what he said has sort of come true, and I was feeling more and more pressure, and one reason for this is I managed to produce a study that surprised even academic authorities without having mastered the basic skills of the craft, but how was I going to keep going like that…

Wu Qi: So when you were working on Zhejiang Village, had you thought about future plans? Had you already decided to be a scholar?

Xiang Biao: When I was working on Zhejiang Village I was really into it, and since I had financial support, there was no work pressure. Because it worked out really well, I got into graduate school without any effort. With a graduate degree from Beida, finding work should not be a problem. I didn't really think about it until the end of my M.A. I thought that work would be boring, and that doing a Ph.D. at Beida would be boring too, since I had been in Beida for so many years, but that studying abroad might be difficult as I would have to pass the Toefl. At the time, Zhou Feizhou, who was ahead of me, had gone to Science and Technology University in Hong Kong, and Wang Hansheng thought we should get him to help me apply to the Ph.D. program there. I applied together with another student from my dorm.

After a week I got my answer from the university, and they rejected me right away because I didn't have the required Toefl grade. What happened next was pure luck. Frank Pieke, a Dutch scholar at Oxford who paid a lot of attention to what Chinese scholars published in China, happened onto my study and thought it was great, so he sought me out, and encouraged me to go to Oxford, saying that he would arrange a scholarship. When I ask him about it now, he acts like it is no big deal, but in fact he got me a full scholarship, the only one for the entire department, so he had to argue with the other professors and convince them. When I got to Oxford, I could not speak English at all, nor could I understand class lectures. When I had to defend my fieldwork project, one of the professors said the word "outrageous" two times. This may have been the first time in history that something like this was said during a project defense at a place like Oxford. I didn't know what "outrageous" meant, but I knew that it was not good, and I went back and looked it up in the dictionary, and asked other students, and finally understood. I spent a sleepless night, walking across the campus, the same garden next to where I live now. By all this, I mean to thank Professor Pieke for having fought for that full

scholarship for me, because I think there was probably a lot of pressure on him in that first year too, because if the scholarship had gone to another student, they surely would have done better than I did. All of this was devastating to me at the time.

Wu Qi: In the preface to the Chinese translation of *Global "Body Shopping"* you talk directly about the difficulty of this transition. Your description was "my entire memory of that year of Oxford was of the dark clouds hanging over me." How were you feeling? This must have been a big shock after the freedom, self-confidence, and strength you felt at Beida.

Xiang Biao: I couldn't understand much in my classes, and when I talked with other students after class, I was also a bit disappointed, because Oxford students did not seem as interesting as Beida students. Thinking back on it now, the biggest problem was language, not liking things that I did not understand. I was in a state of shock and not really able to reflect clearly on my situation. This might have been a little bit like what Takeuchi Yoshimi* (1910–1977) said was the difference between China and Japan in response to the shock of the arrival of Western culture, in which China fell into a stage of profound self-doubt and therefore self-reconstruction, while Japan instead engineered a transformation. China completely fell apart, trying to figure out why she was different, not trying to figure out *where* the differences were but *what* they were, and believing that the difference was a fundamental matter, rather than a gap to be bridged. Moreover, this fact was seen as the origin of reflection and reconstruction, and hence revolutionary. Japan chose the route of transformation.

That's how I was at the time. I couldn't thoroughly think through why I was different, I just felt I *was* different, and behind. I hadn't read enough, so I needed to catch up, so I read an enormous amount of stuff that I did not understand at all. Many of the things I read were quite superficial and not the things I should have been reading, not the basics. Before I went to do fieldwork, nothing I read gave me any real inspiration, so I just lumped all those terms together and put them aside. After doing my fieldwork, I happened upon a collection of essays entitled *Virtualism*, the preface of which was the first English essay I really understood after arriving at Oxford, because my English was getting better. That essay was not necessarily a classic, but because I understood it, I began to see things clearly.

This gets back to what we were talking about before, which is that it doesn't matter whether the theory is new or old, deep or superficial, and especially right or wrong. The point of theory is to communicate something. This is extremely important. Even if the theory is elementary, as long as it wakes up something in your own thinking, and makes you into a new subject, the theory can be revolutionary. It is in fact very difficult to find language that resonates with the reader. Not only do you have to address the structure of the subject you are studying, you also need to have a good grasp of why it matters and where you are going with it, at which point you can write simply and in a way that reaches the reader. After my ideas became clear, I wrote my dissertation fairly quickly. There were all sorts of problems, but given my language level, I was relatively satisfied with what I did.

Wu Qi: So the problems you had with your dissertation at Oxford were not that big a setback when compared with your writer's block in recent years.

Xiang Biao: That's right. Thinking back on it, it didn't leave any psychological scars, because it was like a blitzkrieg. My sole goal then was to write the dissertation, within a certain amount of time, which focused all the pressure on one thing. In that kind of situation, I didn't think about it all that much, and instead just concentrated completely on dealing with that huge pressure, and there was no time for this to become a problem in terms of mood or psychology.

Youth Melancholy

Wu Qi: At present, the most common mood among Chinese youth on the Internet is "melancholy." Material conditions are better and kids have more freedom and their own hobbies and are starting to have fun, but the result is that they all lapse into a universal funk as if nothing had any meaning, and they can't see how life will change.

Xiang Biao: Since the overall economy is still growing, it can sustain everybody for another 10 or 20 years, so people born in the 1970s and the 1980s will be okay, but this road will certainly come to an end someday. Fun means the ability to feel interest and excitement in a thing in its own right, without the need for some outside "return on investment" to stimulate you. Art and math are good examples, for which people probably have natural affinities. Our education, both in the family and at school, forcefully compels us to think about this "return on investment," and ensures that you never structure your career around a personal interest.

Wu Qi: Good times on the economic front are perhaps not completely over, and many of these "sad" young people are still enjoying themselves, even if subjectively they are not feeling it. For example, the household registration system[1] is slowly become less of a constraint, as global and

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[1] Translator's note: The household registration system (*hukou*) in China divides the national population into urban and rural residents. People with rural *hukou* cannot legally move to the cities. This system, introduced in the 1950s, tied peasants to land in order for the state to procure sufficient amounts of grain at very low prices, and at the same time limited the size of urban population who relied on state provisions. Another effect

national mobility increases, and people are no longer choosing to live only in Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, with more choosing second and third-tier cities, or even going back to their villages. These are all concrete elements that suggest things are changing for the better.

Xiang Biao: We need alternate sources of life meaning. To give you an example, my niece studies painting, and I took her to a lesson where the teacher talked to her about painting, telling her that painting should be beautiful, and if she were painting the portrait of someone who had an ugly hand, she should put that hand behind the person's back so that people couldn't see it. This can be an entertaining way to talk to a child, but if art is understood as merely something that is visually beautiful, kids may get bored with it pretty quickly, because, in this sense, beauty is formal and not something you can seek out. The true power of art is to produce a kind of visual reaction that makes you think. In this sense, art provokes thought, which is a better angle from which to understand it because it leaves more room for fun and lots of room for the curiosity of the children. If you faithfully paint that ugly hand and render it full of life, then it might really move people.

This brings us back to our original question. The rule in studying or in trying to understand society is that all of this has to have a relationship with yourself, otherwise your art is just about making something beautiful, so you're just performing a service, and trying to please people. We should turn it around and think not about trying to please people, but about having fun ourselves. Even in a simple service industry, say you're working in a restaurant, if you really pay attention, you can find something fun, you can be like a writer observing how people are different, how they act at the service counter, how you interact with them…If we give workers a lot of autonomy and space and allow them to feel that they are not just a mechanical piece of something but instead a member of society interacting with other people, they can wind up being quite innovative.

Now everyone is talking about how artificial intelligence is creating "surplus people." I have a research topic on people in Northeast China without a work unit or stable employment, whose relationship to the system is distant. There will be more and more of such people, and what

of the policy is that a resident registered in one city cannot move to another without state permission. The system is slowing disappearing, especially for younger, well-educated urban dwellers.

their role will be is a global challenge. In fact, the relationship between economics and politics may experience a huge change, in that people may not need to spend too much time doing material work to make a living. We may be able to survive without much labor input, and economic activity in a person's social life may become less and less important. When that happens, we will have to reimagine everything. There is the idea of Basic Income, for example, the notion that every citizen receives a certain amount of money every month whether they work or not. In an extreme case, if artificial intelligence becomes greatly developed, with most work becoming automated, then the remaining question will be that of redistribution. This will not happen in China overnight, but we still need to engage our imagination. If earning money to fill your stomach is not your main goal, then what is the meaning of your life, and what is your relationship to society?

The important thing is to get back to a focus on people. In the 1980s we debated whether the human being was the starting point of Marxism. This question is even more important now. In the lives of everyday people, China's years of reform have meant a process of transformation in the meaning of life. We spend years studying hard, passing exams, finding a good job, buying a house—in this process meaning has been externalized. Finally, we need to stop this and focus on people again. The same is true for the government. In the past, all questions were economic questions, and as long as the economy was developing, it seemed like we could fix anything. But look at today's problems—ethnic minority relations, relations with Hong Kong, youth issues—none of these can be solved through economic development, and in any event, economic development is not limitless. We are not going to wind up with everyone flying his own private plane, so again it is more and more urgent to focus on people. I am not talking about some abstract humanistic spirit, but instead about what kind of relationship should exist among people. This is closely related to the economy, and brings us back to questions about the distribution of material resources and how to harmonize social relations, and will not necessarily be built on a foundation of productive labor.

The Center and the Margins

Wu Qi: It seems to me that the experiences you had growing up and your concrete suggestions are sort of mutually reaffirming. In other words, clearly understanding yourself can be a tool or weapon for thinking about questions outside yourself. Could we understand it that way?

Xiang Biao: Once you put it this way, I think pretty much everyone would agree. The key is how you arrive at an understanding, how you reach a harmony between your historical limitations and your current ambitions. Someone who can do this well is a true hero. A true hero is not someone who changes the world, but who changes every day of their life. What is too bad is that, with modernity, the "margins" and the "center" have become antagonistic. Chinese people have such strong feelings about the center that they feel that life at the margins is not worth living, which is something that is really worrisome. Power and resources are way too centralized. People often say that the "second generation of the CCP founders" is usually not corrupt, because they grew up in relative comfort and never had to worry about money. I think there is something to this, and when we look around us or read the papers, it looks like a lot of cases of massive corruption were committed by persons originally from the bottom of society—which is true in academics as well—because it is easier for people who started out at the bottom of society to go too far, and this is because they were too conscious about their "marginal" status. They don't accept their fate and will use any means to get from the margins to the center. And when they get to the center they feel

like they can completely abandon all those principles about how to be a human being that they learned at the margins.

Marginal people's desires to get to the center can be strong, which mobilizes them but also distorts them along the way. And once they have arrived at the center, many people become thoroughly corrupt, because they never really had a clear idea of who they were. The whole point of their existence had been to get to the center, and once they got there they abandoned the people and the places that raised them and their relationships with those around them, becoming someone without principles. Life principles are not sustained through abstract notions, but instead through specific social relations; of course, this is Confucianism, but it is surely true. If you are unclear about your relations with the people around you and the world in which you live, you can easily become an opportunist, and other people become mere tools at your disposal. The scholarly world is like this, and it is completely obvious in the world of officialdom. Business is the same. An employee of a company, or a student, does his utmost to get to the provincial capital, to get to Beijing, and once he is no longer "grounded," he has no place, no agency, and can be completely instrumentalized. Thus it is dangerous when the center is too strong.

The strength of the center in Chinese history basically relied on local interiorizations of this center, in which every place felt that it was itself a small center. Then everything was bound together on a symbolic level, so that on the one hand there was an idea of the "great unity,"*[1] but at the same time people did not feel that they had to kill themselves to get to the top because their lives were meaningless. In fact, there were many peripheries that the center paid little attention to; local areas had a lot of autonomy, and relations between the center and the margins were flexible and open. By contrast, the cultural meaning of "local" has now been completely emptied out, and "local museums" and "local tourism" do not speak to local people. It is important to repair this relationship between center and peripheries.

Wu Qi: We've gone from individual stories to the biggest possible questions! When you look at China's entire modern experience, when do you feel like this reshaping of the center–peripheries relationship started?

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[1] Translator's note: In traditional society, this was considered a positive symbol, but Jin Guantao (b. 1947) connected it to his notion that traditional China had been an "ultra-stable society," meaning that many social processes were frozen in place.

With nation-building? After that, we started to build a new sense of centrality, right?

Xiang Biao: It indeed started with building a modern nation-state. One reason that building a modern nation-state was so difficult, and gave way immediately to warlords and civil war during the Republican period, was because the process destroyed the original balance between the center and the peripheries. The symbolic centrality of the Qing dynasty was abolished, the regions no longer obeyed, and various provinces demanded their independence. Of course, the idea that each province has autonomy was a mainstream choice in early drafts of the constitution, which was grounded in federalism. From a longer term perspective, what we call the debate between feudalism and centralization always existed in China, and when Fei Xiaotong later on argued that the best solution for China was local self-rule, this had to do with his notion of the "differential mode of association."

Here we are again with the "differential mode of association," which is not a simple empirical idea, but rather a structure, a sort of political vision or arrangement. Political arrangements are of course greatly affected by wars, like the Northern Expedition* (1926–1928) or the Civil War (1945–1949). The Japanese invasion (1937–1945) was a decisive event, and is one reason that China ultimately achieved unity. During the anti-Japanese War, the CCP got organized and the sense of nationalism came to be shared as never before. The question you raise is a good one: how should we understand the "center" that emerged from state-building? It is not just a single center, but a number of layered centers, in a regional hierarchy.

This was also related to the planned economy at the time and to the system of grain purchase and redistribution. Redistribution meant first centralizing all resources, after which redistribution would occur, which required a center supported by multiple layers. With the reform and opening there was an important new slogan—"strengthen horizontal relationships." What this meant at the time was that the provinces could trade freely with one another, which would strengthen the flow of commodities and the function of markets without going through the center. In the beginning, selling Sichuan pigs to Guangdong markets was like a war, and the Sichuan government sent people to the provincial borders to stop it. The farmers of course wanted to sell their pigs in Guangdong because prices were higher, but authorities in Sichuan thought that this would make the price of pork go up in Sichuan, so they blocked the sale. There

were a lot of wars like that at the time. In addition to the pig war, there was the coal war, the silk cocoon war, the cotton war, etc.

Today, despite the high volume of commodity exchange, the idea of the center has not changed, which is intriguing. How we make life at the margins interesting is to a great degree a question of cultural construction and ideology. If local writers started to write about local culture, this might eventually work. But what they are doing today, which is using so-called "root culture"* to try to get people to stay in rural areas, will not work, because today's China is a country that is well-connected internally and even to the world at large. So if we want to develop rural culture, it cannot be an isolated, closed rural culture, but instead, a rural consciousness inscribed in the world, in regions throughout China. Local writers will need a keen sense of vision in order to describe their position within these larger structures.

That makes me think of Fukuoka, in Japan, which does not define itself in terms of its relationship to Tokyo, but rather positions itself in terms of its connections with Korea, China, and especially Qingdao, in Shandong, seeing itself as an East Asian crossroads. Guangxi, a province in south China, also positions itself as a gateway to Southeast Asia, and it has many daily interactions with mainland Southeast Asia. This had already taken on cultural meaning so that Guangxi people feel like what they do every day is interesting, and they are not always thinking that there's no future here for their children, that they'll have to go to Beijing.

Scholars have a huge responsibility in this, and they should not talk only about great national issues, but rather should try to achieve clarity in concrete smaller issues. China today needs thousands, tens of thousands of local gentry, and if they could tap into their potential and systematically give voice to local identities, this would mean something. These local voices should focus on their own diversity, which could build a solid foundation for lasting stability in China, because lasting stability in a country like China cannot be like one iron plate, but has to be a flexible organism, like a chain bridge, where if one side is weighed down, the other moves up. We need to break through the current emphasis on over-centralization, only after which can we arrive at some sort of integration of local social and cultural autonomy with the unity the central authorities prize. In the absence of the cultural autonomy of local society, everybody winds up elbowing their way to the center, which is in fact quite dangerous.

Wu Qi: Even if you don't see yourself as being part of a scholarly tradition, in terms of this specific question and viewpoint, and especially your views of "peripheries" and "center," are you not part of the same genealogy as Fei Xiaotong?

Xiang Biao: That's an interesting question. I would say we're part of the same genealogy because my appreciation of the importance of local regions was largely inspired by him. He made foundational contributions to empirical research on China, explaining how China's unity worked. Unity for Fei did not mean a rigid structure. But the situation is different now because as a great power, we really do need a strong center, in part in order to redistribute resources. For example, Shanghai and Tibet should have a relationship of mutual assistance. So while I champion cultural and social autonomy, in terms of the economy, we need one unified market, in terms of resources, we need the strength of government administration to carry out necessary redistribution, and there are things like the army, and taxes, which have to be managed from the center. The second change is globalization. The local autonomy that I am talking about cannot be achieved by closing the door to the outside world. Instead, every local place has to become a small center, a crossroads, like an acupuncture point that is connected to the rest of the body, to use an analogy.

Wu Qi: That makes me think of this idea of "Chinese consciousness," which people are talking more and more about. It seems like this was an official slogan that turned into a real question. As China becomes increasingly involved in globalization, maybe Chinese scholars should not only try to explain things from their part of the world but should also talk about China's relationship to the system of globalization. There are even some people who argue that this should be a new responsibility, or a new preoccupation, for Chinese scholars. What do you think?

Xiang Biao: I of course agree. Looking at things from a macro perspective and a contemporary perspective, it is true that the world is talking more and more about China, but from the perspective of the twentieth century, the current era is not the most important era of China's impact on the world. The most important era of the twentieth century was in fact the 1960s and 1970s. The Egyptian economist Samir Amin (1931–2018) notes in his memoirs that when the People's Liberation Army liberated Beijing in 1949, his 18-year-old self felt that the world had entered a new age. When the Chinese writer Hu Feng* (1902–1985) published his poem "Time is Beginning" in the *People's Daily* as part of the celebration of the founding of the People's Republic, people all thought the

poem was fantastic, but who knew that a young Egyptian was thinking the same thing? In the 1950s, Stalin died in 1953, and then there was the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union CPSU in 1956, and then the dispute between the CCP and the CPSU. This was the heart of the 1960s and had a huge impact on young intellectuals throughout the world. The question at the time was that socialism in practice was getting more and more bureaucratized, becoming more or less like capitalism, so everyone felt that the thinking behind the Cultural Revolution was anti-bureaucratic and that it would truly spread to the villages. The British artist John Berger (1926–2007) published a photo album, *A Fortunate Man*, where he talked about a British physician who wanted to devote himself to marginal regions and wound up dying in China, where he had gone in hopes of serving as a barefoot doctor. China's impact on the world then was greater than it is now. Have we really come up with a clear path toward the future or proposed some great ideal?

Things are different now, and China's engagement with the world is not based on ideas, but on commerce. Every year, 8% of the Chinese population goes abroad to travel, study, or do business. One Belt-One Road[2] is surely important. And the size of our economy means that one day China's currency, the Renminbi, will become a world currency. China's current rise, including things like Alibaba,[3] is due to the size of China's population. This is interesting too. We used to think that our big population was a burden, while now it's a bonus. For things like electronic commerce, online payment systems, and the platform economy, our greatest advantage is that we have a lot of people. In this light, I don't feel like China's rise has anything all that special about it.

But you also brought up the identity of Chinese scholars, which to me is a huge, complicated question. And this makes me think of what we talked about before, which is the difference between my daily activities and my intellectual concerns. There are always tensions between my teaching, my students' expectations of me on the one hand, and my own experiences of growing up and the things I am concerned about on the

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[2] Translator's note: One Belt-One Road is an ambitious Chinese economic development and commercial project that focuses on improving connectivity and cooperation among multiple countries spread across the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe.

[3] Translator's note: Alibaba is a Chinese internet platform focused, among other things, on e-commerce.

other. My participation in British politics is nonexistent, because I know little about the history, and how the current issues became issues. As for my engagement with China, I also feel a certain distance, an estrangement. This is quite painful, and means that my life is not quite complete. But there are good things about it too because the tension brings me fresh perspectives. So what I should be doing now is creating a new transnational life world, but to date, this has not been entirely successful. The lack of success has something to do with my lack of confidence in the past few years, and a lack of clarity about my place in the world. If I'm not clear about that place, then I need recognition from the mainstream as compensation, which comes to feel like an obligation, which then becomes a worry.

Whether Chinese scholars can make significant contributions to the world is not something we can plan for. The most important thing scholars should do is to make clear what questions they are concerned about, and what their positions are. I used to endorse the idea of a "Chinese scholarship" or a "China school" but now I think it is something that can't be planned for. An important reason for this is that China's rise occurred in an environment of globalization, which means that it's quite far-fetched to try to make universal statements on the basis of China's uniqueness. It would be better for China to explain her own problems clearly.

Wu Qi: We can talk in generalities about "China" and a unique version of "Chinese social sciences," but in fact everyone starts out from a different place, and here we have at least two traditions: one is that of traditional China with its image of *tianxia**[4] which seeks inspiration from past ideas; another is the tradition of Red China. Many scholars follow those paths in trying to come up with a new understanding of China and the world. What is the relationship between those traditions? When you talk about the relationship between the center and the margins, this in fact is a perspective that comes from a deep place in history, and when you talk about the Cultural Revolution, you are also looking for a connection between history and the masses. Why is it that these two narratives are coming together in today's twenty-first century? And how

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[4] Translator's note: *Tianxia* literally means "everything under heaven," but it is best understood as the idea of Chinese universalism in traditional times, prior to the Western impact. China imagined itself to be at the center of a world defined by morality, a morality that could be appreciated and learned by peripheral peoples.

are they coming together? If we say that we should understand who we are, and what China is from the perspective of history, then what in fact is our life experience, and what after all is the narrative of a modern state? It seems like we have no consensus on this. And given that, if we want to talk about our own little individual narratives, we run up against the same problem…Is our everyday life finally related to China's narrative, and if so, what is the relationship? How do we start to answer these questions?

Xiang Biao: A lot of people have tried to work on this, like Gan Yang* (b. 1953) in his *Uniting the Three Traditions*.*[5] In addition to traditional civilization and the modern socialist revolution, there's also the dichotomy between pre-reform (1949–1978) and post-reform (after 1978), and many ruptures, and how to connect all these together is a question for history and philosophy. We first need to ask what questions we are concerned about today, and then focus on the kind of China narrative we want to use to explain our dilemma. To over-generalize, some people use the experience of Red China to reflect on the current situation, while others use premodern China, but neither of them has much to do with the idea of "China." Both of these kinds of people are essentially saying they don't like how we are doing things now, and suggesting that we look at how we did things in the 1960s, or look at how we did things in the sixteenth century. It is a comparison that transcends time and space. But what you are asking is whether we could construct a consistent, fairly stable China narrative that would have an interpretive power in the current situation, that could serve as a reference. I think this is of course possible, because looking at things from the historical record, China's borders haven't changed much and the population is largely what it has been. But from the perspective of how we do things, my instinctive response is that I don't see the need to build this kind of narrative of continuity.

To put it simply, if you talk about politics in Britain—Britain is also quite a mess. It's not like France; Britain set up its centralized power quite late, and even now the centralized power is not that strong. There is still no written constitution, yet it was tremendously powerful as a world

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[5] Translator's note: Gan Yang is a well-known scholar and institution-builder in China. In 2005, he gave a speech at Tsinghua University* in which he attributed China's success to the country's having "unified three traditions," i.e., Confucian personalism (attachment to family and place), a Maoist sense of justice, and a Dengist emphasis on market efficiency. The formula was extremely influential in China's intellectual world.

empire. It seems to me like they did not feel the need for a coherent historical narrative. Despite the lack of this narrative, it in practice distilled a certain number of principles that cohered fairly well. China is sort of the reverse of this, in that its continuity is actually quite weak, and there have been many ruptures, but every new dynasty wrote the history of the previous dynasty, so that in historiographical terms there is a lot of continuity, which in turn created a strong coherence at the level of consciousness—that we are "Chinese people," that "China" is a thing. But in actual life, there have been huge ruptures. As for Britain's national consciousness, it is quite strong among the elite, but for the middle class it is all very fuzzy, and they don't care about what "Britishness" is.

Too much emphasis on historical continuity may obscure certain things. I recall that when I first arrived at Oxford, Jessica Rawson (b. 1943)—Dean of Merton College, Oxford's oldest, and former director of the Oriental Section of the British Museum—asked me what I worked on, and I told her population migration. She is an archeologist and works on Western Zhou bronzes, and she told me that migration has a long history. I told her I wasn't interested in history, to which she replied, "if you don't know history, how do you interpret the present?" People at Oxford were surprised when I said things like that, because for traditional disciplines, history is very important, and in fact, everything starts with history. I still remember our discussion. I was trying to be clever and came up with a metaphor, which was the difference between movies and theater. Theater takes place on a stage, with simple trappings, limited in space and time, where the performance and the dialogue transpire. Movies have no limits, they can take five years to shoot, after which it is edited down to two hours. You can shoot anything in the world and integrate many historical narratives. But because theater is a world unto itself that comes with many restrictions, its depth and its impact on the audience are greater. But if you insert history into the drama, it becomes an ordinary narrative. Novels and poems can be compared in the same way. Poems are tightly constrained in form, but this may give poetry more impact. Rawson would surely disagree, and I was clearly in the minority.

From an epistemological or a methodological perspective I was probably on thin ice, but in terms of instinctive reactions, I also tend to think that if you pay too much attention to history you wind up explaining away too many contradictions. Sometimes if you focus on a particular moment, it can sharpen your thinking. This may not be widely accepted in academics, or it might be a question of two different approaches: the

long gaze of history can indeed show us where the problems came from, but the explanation might not inspire much new thinking. Maybe if you confront the problem in a more limited, dramatic way, without focusing too much on the long-term historical aspects, the problem stands out more intensely, which might help us think things through.

Putting together a comprehensive historical narrative is what traditional historians do. But if you really want to get into history, it is clear that you have to start from the present and grasp today's problems. You start from these problems and trace them back to earlier problems, which is the only way to truly enter into history and shape a historical viewpoint. If this is how I approach history, then I don't necessarily need a continuous, stable historical narrative of "China," I can live with the ruptures. For example, Hainan's problems may be more like those of Malaysia or Thailand, because they had a lot of historical connections, so even if they are not the same society now, and were not historically either, nevertheless, the development of social space in these three places is not at all how we define it in current administrative terms. So I don't worry too much if there is a stable "China narrative," and my feeling is things are more interesting without one, that its absence allows us to see more things.

If you want to construct a unified narrative, then philosophically you have to assume that "China" exists as a given unit, but from the perspective of comparative anthropology, or sociology, or social science in general, "China" is just what people practice. Objectively speaking there will be some real connections among the practices that took place in the place where China is today, but do these connections form a basis from which to analyze other things? This is hard to say. Looking at it open-mindedly, we could say that how China changes is in the hands of the next generation, and that it is not up to us to think for them or draw up blueprints for them. If fact, today's Chinese people are not at all like Chinese in the Qing period, which does not strike me as being a problem.

When I use historical materials, I don't put too much emphasis on any necessary continuity. From a certain perspective, history is like a foreign society. I could use the example of ancient China, or contemporary India, or Britain to imagine the future. I am Chinese, which is nothing to be particularly proud of. I was born into that culture, in the same way that I am from Wenzhou, and that I grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in a mid-sized town in the south. This is fate, which I have to embrace completely and work through. In this sense, my personal identity is clear. People

nowadays tend to imply something else when talking about personal identity, as if you have to protect a set of values and respect certain behavioral norms, or inherit a certain cultural attitude, but for me, I see no such cause–effect relationship in identity.

Wu Qi: To make a connection with what you mentioned before about blockages that you experienced in your scholarly work, I was wondering whether the solution to the blockage was in fact returning to Chinese questions.

Xiang Biao: Yes, you could put it that way, but it might be less returning to Chinese questions, and more to my personal status as a marginal person, a return to the question of who I am. It was a question of thinking clearly about what, finally, I could do, and what my relationship with the world is. I think everyone in the world faces this question and should try to work through the question of who they are. Otherwise, the same crisis will always come up.

Personal Crisis

Wu Qi: Maybe this is the time to talk a little bit more about the obstacles you ran into. We've already mentioned it several times, but every time, we were talking about something else, so we didn't follow it up. It seems to have been a fairly serious crisis, which had an impact on many choices you made in your work and your personal life. So what actually happened? How did it affect your work?

Xiang Biao: It was basically writer's block. I had been working on a topic for years but was never satisfied with what I wrote, and because I didn't have really deep thoughts about it, I couldn't find my own voice, so it got tiresome. So I sort of went back and forth, trying various frameworks and theories, and wound up working myself into a painful state, but I had invested so much energy into it that I couldn't drop it either. It was the same for other things I was trying to write. I could never get anything to flow and everything seemed a little forced, which is the concrete way I experienced the crisis.

I tried to get past it, and started to write in Chinese, in many instances addressing whatever was going on at the time—Hong Kong, the Educated Youth question. I also started doing some interviews, like one with the non-fiction writer Guo Yujie*, without giving it much thought, but once I had done it I got emails from some former classmates, and it seemed like lots of people had read the interview. So I discovered that a lot of young people on the web sympathized with me, or that I had inspired them. All of this made me happy, and I rediscovered my capacity

to feel. This was extremely valuable to me because it was exactly what I had been struggling with, the fact that I couldn't find the meaning I was looking for, and that what I was saying didn't resonate with anyone. Writing in English, it is hard to have that kind of connection with people. So I am very grateful for my experiences with Chinese media at the time. It gave me a certain self-confidence, a feeling that what I was thinking and writing about still had a certain value.

Wu Qi: What were you working on when this happened?

Xiang Biao: The project on Northeast China, dealing with labor outmigration. An important part of the problem was that I was hoping to make that study into a really good academic project. But what does "good" mean? According to whose standards? Not the standards of the people of Northeast China, and not my personal standards as a Wenzhou person, but rather the standards of professional Western academic specialists. But that is not my strong point, to keep that goal in my head while doing my work, so I wound up not really immersing myself in those people's lives and stayed a bit too much on the surface. I came up with various theories and commentaries, and it was all quite professional but it was not that meaningful. I set aside my original gentry style and decided to seek recognition. Why did I want recognition? Because I didn't have my own little world in a grounded way.

Wu Qi: In a certain sense *Global "Body Shopping"* is also in the Western academic style, so why did you not have a similar crisis while working on that topic?

Xiang Biao: When I was working on *Global "Body Shopping"* I also struggled for a long time. This was because I had chosen an academic question, which ultimately seemed somewhat artificial, concerning what constitutes the so-called "diaspora self-consciousness." I was doing all of this in Australia, and it did not come out well. But while I was working on it I discovered the "body shopping" practice, which inspired me. When I started my project on Northeast China, I had more on my mind, and frameworks started to multiply, but I spent relatively little time there and did not develop enough familiarity with the research materials, so I lacked confidence.

Wu Qi: So what you are always hoping for is to get back to the situation like when you studied Zhejiang Village?

Xiang Biao: That's right. I really enjoyed that situation, but even as I say that, I doubt myself, because I may not be able to do it again. But let's go ahead and say it like that, and maybe others can learn from it.

I have a desire to return to my gentry perspective. I feel like that out of everything I've written, the only parts that were really alive, forceful, and interesting were when I described how people in Zhejiang Village behaved and thought. My comments were more or less just gravy. If I hadn't been immersed in their lives then I would have been just spouting hot air, and everything real in that book came from the masses, and that's the truth of the matter. But you need a lot of self-confidence to work this way, and the ability to concentrate as well because it takes a lot of time and it might well be that no one will notice.

Wu Qi: While we're on the topic of recognition, from Chinese people's perspective, your book came out and you started teaching at Oxford, which is its own type of recognition, to say nothing of the fact Western recognition is often seen by Chinese people as a higher form of recognition. This seems not to have calmed your anxieties, so what effect did all that have?

Xiang Biao: That's hard to say. The anxieties I have now have to do with my position at Oxford. If I weren't at Oxford, I would be at a less famous school worrying about tenure, or maybe I wouldn't be anxious at all. So you're right. My position did not allow me to get past my anxieties, but we can turn things around and say that it was because I have this position that I could have such worries. In this sense, I am very grateful to Oxford.

Oxford did help me to realize what my anxieties were about. I experienced some "culture shocks" there. When I first arrived at Oxford, I had to write up a research plan, and my first draft shocked my supervisor. He told me that it was an absolutely infeasible plan, and asked me why I would write it like that. I went back and read other people's plans, and it was my turn to be shocked, because they were all straightforward and simple, as if they were discussing things with their parents. This strategy is much better than the kind of soaring, formal thing I had written. When we write reports in China, it's like we have to position ourselves above everyday life, we are pretentious and formal, divorced from life, as if it is not normal to include everyday life activities. Later on, I had to evaluate other people's applications, and there was one that left a big mark on me. It was a husband and wife who submitted a common project, and they particularly stressed that they were going to do the work together because in this way they were going to be able to take care of their family and allocate their time efficiently—everything was really specific. In China, we feel like we need to avoid that because it has to do with private life, but this is

how they wrote it up. After I read the proposal, I gave it an exceptionally high mark, because I felt that their plan was clear, direct, and believable. This is something we in China should learn from.

So to return to our original topic, we should not worry about being marginal, or about not knowing enough. As long as you put yourself out there openly and honestly people will react well. There is no need to put on airs. When you apply for research grants it is the same, you should be concrete, and if you can show me that you have a genuine emotional connection to this topic, then I'll understand all the more why you want to work on it. I will trust you, and believe that you will do the work. Some topics have clearly been copied from other people, which gives you an entirely different feeling. I think Westerners are right to insist on individuality. It's the same for politicians. Everyone wants to know what their lives are like, what they eat for breakfast, what kind of liquor they drink, and they will only believe in them once they know these things. It's clearly the other way around in East Asia, and all of this is hidden. Leaders aren't individuals, but incarnations of power, which is a very different understanding. When I got to Oxford, I was grateful for the job, which gave me the opportunity to think about such things.

Wu Qi: From talking with you I have the feeling that it is your feeling of distance that allows you to deal with Chinese issues in a calm, unhurried fashion, unlike scholars in China who are often impatient and anxious. Is it because you've been working outside of China for a long time? Or some balance between the margins and the center?

Xiang Biao: In terms of my attitudes about daily life, that might have something to do with it, because scholars in China feel the pressure and the direct interference every day, which can affect them emotionally and lead them to make quick judgments. I always stress that we need to immerse ourselves more and penetrate further, but if you're anxious you can't do that, so you stay on the surface and rush to judgment. A "sense of distance" is an analytical or a methodological concept, with a certain dialectical relationship to implicating yourself in the object of your research. A sense of distance does not have to do with your degree of concern or familiarity with your research topic, because you don't want distance here—the closer the better—you need to immerse yourself into your topic as much as possible. When you do your analysis, you need to climb up to the mountain and look out at the plain, which is how you achieve objectivity, flexibility, and comprehensiveness.

Wu Qi: You don't spend much time in China. How do you keep up with what is going on there?

Xiang Biao: The reason that I pay a lot of attention to non-fiction writing is that it has become a good way to understand what is happening in China. A lot of our media is pretty well-written, with a good degree of detail and clarity, which is quite valuable to me. As the boundary between intellectuals and non-intellectuals gets increasingly blurry, cooperation between the researcher and those being researched becomes more important. In addition, those being researched have many ideas that in terms of the depth of analysis surpass what the researcher is doing. In light of this, the role played by the researcher is more and more that of recording and discovering what their research subjects think, a change that I welcome. If I'm working on young people, it is easy to do Internet-based research, so I don't have to go off to some village, and their feedback and input become part of the research. What the researcher should bring to the table is a more systematic organization of research materials and a more accurate historical narrative, which is not easy, and can be really dull, but we can no longer count on our own innovative viewpoints to be enough. The viewpoints should come from the people, and our work is to find them and present them. A lot of people are already doing this now, and Chinese society is producing a great deal of discourse and self-analysis, all of which serve as excellent source materials, as well as the source of our inspiration, or even of our theory. We used to get our data from villages and our theory from libraries and books, but things are completely different now.

Globalization and Anti-Globalization

Wu Qi: In the past few years, scholars inside and outside of China have been paying close attention to international news treating the US election and Brexit, and their moods have varied widely, but they have come to feel that the progress of globalization is in crisis. What are your thoughts about this? Has this influenced your assessment of globalization?

Xiang Biao: I think it's funny when people in the United States say the victory of Trump is a crisis, the darkest day in the history of humanity. In China, "crisis" was an important concept in the 1980s. It was said that China had to have a "crisis consciousness,*" otherwise it might lose its "right to exist on the planet (*qiuji**)." "River Elegy" also talked about the civilizational crisis. But this was a crisis that intellectuals fabricated themselves. What is a crisis? In the practice of the lives of everyday people, when young peoples' friendships fall apart, this might be a crisis; when you gamble in the stock market and lose, this is not necessarily a crisis, but if you've already bragged to your friends that you were going to make money when in fact you lose, this might be a crisis. A crisis is not merely a failure, it's a failure without an explanation.

Whether Trump's election could be a crisis for world development is a question intellectuals made up themselves. It is a fact that Trump was elected, and we have to understand why. The most important thing is that the Democrats did not do a good job in Wisconsin and other swing states, which meant that the vote in those states suddenly changed, and the reason for this is that heavy industry declined in these areas. This truly

is a bit contingent and does not reflect a major change in America as a whole, and to get a grasp of how important it is we would have to get a sense of proportion. After all, more people still voted for the Democrats. Now they are talking about Russian interference, which is kind of funny. Aren't Americans stirring up color revolutions all the time?

Second, even if Russia did interfere by influencing public opinion, when people voted they were crystal clear on the policies and the person they voted for. My feeling is that all of this is just an attempt by the middle class to find an explanation for something they don't understand, and is an exaggeration of the crisis. I prefer to look at all this noise with a sense of distance to try to see what the underlying issue is. My first thought was that this was an adjustment between two Americas, one being a global-ized, elite America, and the other being a local, populist America. Trump represented a reaction of populist America against the elites. In the long term, there is no clear evidence that Trump will have a disastrous effect on the world situation.

A sense of distance is the same thing as a sense of history. When certain things happen, I sense that there is no need to go overboard looking for a symbolic explanation. Life is not all that long, only 70 or 80 years, and if during that time something happens for two or three days, then we should put it in context and assess its importance. History always changes like this. I feel a certain sense of distance from Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997), and do not see him as my spiritual guide, but I appreciate the sense of distance he attached to his analysis of world history. He never made direct judgments, but rather offered reminders, saying that we cannot know at present whether history is unfolding in a good or bad way, but here are the possible dangers. What he offers is a cautious pushback from an intel-lectual's perspective, and while most people are swept up in the big trends, he sees through them, offering a gentle reminder of the factors behind the trends. His reminders are based on careful analysis and observation and are not merely on general principles.

In the 1950s, there was an important debate at Oxford on "What is History?" between Berlin and the leftist historian Edward Hallett Carr (1882–1982), based on their different views of how to understand the success of the Soviet Union. At first, I was on Carr's side, but later on, came to feel that Berlin made important points as well. To put it simply, Carr said that the USSR had already succeeded and that the role of histo-rians was to explain why it succeeded because we need to know why it happened. Of course, he is right, and when today's liberals are saying

that Trump is a disaster they are not looking at the background factors that explain the "disaster." But Berlin's view was that we don't know if some necessary force explains the success of the Soviet Union, because all historical facts are the product of many contingent factors, nor do we know what the final outcome will be. What we can do today is based on historical experience, and our own moral principles, to issue warnings and reminders concerning where possible dangers might be, what impact present developments might have. We need to be prepared, and not just explain the facts as they are. Both ways of thinking are important.

Wu Qi: Trump nonetheless represents an agenda that is anti-globalization and pro-protectionism, in which all countries retreat within their own borders. Younger generations have more directly and widely benefitted from globalization, which is why many of them dislike Trump. In your experience of working on globalization, have you seen anything that tells you that the tide of globalization is turning?

Xiang Biao: Right now, a lot of anti-globalization is just talk, and we don't know what the result of Trump's policies will be on issues like taxes and the environment. Of course, the discourse itself is important; it is anti-globalization, but the discourse itself is a global phenomenon because people are talking about it everywhere. This is like decolonization from the 1940s through the 1960s, when the original unified colonial markets became independent countries, which was also an important process of globalization. National independence was a global movement, global dialogue and exchange involving Asia, Africa, and Latin America. From that perspective, I don't quite know what the true impact of the call for anti-globalization is on the thought and behavior of young people. China is a big country and enjoys the great advantage that even if everyone is not engaged in globalization, there is a lot of space left within the country. This issue of globalization and anti-globalization may be a bit made-up, by which I mean we are often misled by terms used by the media.

Wu Qi: On this issue, in China, there has been another reaction, which is a resurgence of patriotism. At the same time that some people are saddened by restrictions on globalization (you just gave your opinion on that), another group of young people has embraced a narrative of China that is even more local, even more nationalistic. Maybe we could compare this process with the rise of populism in the United States and Europe, since they occurred pretty much at the same time.

Xiang Biao: First, whether this is anti-globalization depends on our definition. We usually say that after the disintegration of the Soviet Union

and Eastern Europe, all of communism was swept up in the Western-led global market economy, the advancement of technology and transportation, the whole "end of history" thing—in which history was no longer pushed forward by the dialectical movement of antagonistic contradictions, and instead, everyone identified with certain ideas, and we all moved forward smoothly together. As to whether Brexit and Trump mean that they are against this process, that they want to reduce international trade and international exchange, so that contradictions once again become the main motor of progress—I think it's too early to tell.

Brexit is actually quite complicated. Many of those who voted to leave the European Union were farmers who have not fared well in recent years, and whose lives are difficult, but the true leaders of Brexit, like Boris Johnson, belong to the elite. This made up the so-called blue-collar-purple socks pact. "Blue collar" means the working class, and "purple socks" means the upper class, because British upper-class gentlemen often appear in gray suits and sport bright-colored socks, but why would the purple socks want to leave? These people have no sense of nationalism. An Indian author once wrote that Britain has monarchism, republicanism, and racism, but no nationalism, because Britain has always looked at the world from an imperial perspective, and when Britain became a nation it took the form of a global empire. What Boris Johnson says is that he wants to return to the glory the United Kingdom knew as an imperial power, and that Britain has always been a global power, so why are they now wasting time with European officials in Brussels? This is what he said to voters, that once Brexit succeeded, Britain's relations with China and with India would be even better, and he is no doubt expecting to have a free trade deal with the United States, which would make up for the losses incurred by leaving Europe. It is hard to say if this is a return to the model of the nation-state as the principal player. From the American perspective, abandoning globalization is truly hard to imagine, because most of the American economy is global, and its trade war with China is about a fight over who will control the globe and the basic technology of 5G, etc. This is not a fight between two countries, but a fight between two world powers. For this reason, globalization will not diminish. Instead, it means that from now on, the global lens through which we analyze questions has to become all the more acute. This is the first thing.

Second, it also means that the concrete form of globalization can certainly change. At the outset, we thought that globalization was like a solution to China's developmental problems. In China's reform and

opening, the opening was more important than reform, and in fact, the more open we were the more momentum we gained for reform. Deng Xiaoping said that we had to learn from the outside world, open markets to foreigners in order to obtain foreign technology, and therefore promote internal reform. Now it seems that globalization is not necessarily a solution to all our problems, and may even bring new problems and dilemmas.

You mentioned the China narrative. Many people in China feel the need to tell such a narrative because we have the ingredients, the self-confidence, and the stamina to tell China's story. But my point is that such a psychological need is itself a problem. Why is One Belt-One Road a China story? What do the Pakistanis or the Ethiopians involved in the project have to say about it? This is complicated. If you talk with Chinese diplomats, especially those involved with foreign trade or finance, or those who are building projects, you might discover that they have difficulties they cannot talk about, because they don't want to make everything related to One Belt-One Road a "China story." Because if that's how things are, then the eyes of the world are focused on you, thinking that your investments are all the results of Beijing's strategic plot. While in matter of fact, many times there's a Chinese guy who can't sell his shoes in China, so he goes to Africa, but once they are out of China, everyone else thinks that the Sichuanese workers, the Henanese farmers, and the Wenzhou people selling lighters are all part of the China State Construction Engineering Corporation, that they are all part of the One Belt-One Road plan. Given the size of China's economy, it is normal that people leave, whether they have the support of the authorities or not. And yet we insist on making these rich and varied stories into *one* story, stressing out people who don't need more stress.

So from where I stand, the China narrative is quite narrow-minded and is trying to define the self in terms of formal institutions. You are a Chinese person, born and raised in China, this is a fact, but when you look at things, you might be a mother, or a daughter, or a 60-year-old retired teacher, all of whom will have their own perspective on things. When you take a trip to Thailand, you might be interested in how retirees there spend their free time, or when you go to Europe, you might feel close to European mothers. Even more important, you are all ordinary people, with no connection to state power, not knowing much about state policy, so why should you look at the world from the state perspective? Those

who feel that they must have a China narrative may do so because of some feeling of insecurity in their own lives, and thus they need to tie everything up in a huge ribbon to feel secure.

Wu Qi: Can we keep teasing out the China narrative? In an anthropological sense, there are a lot of people today who are embracing rural philosophies and everyday life, in political practice we've had the "people's philosophy," if we go back further there is traditional thought, which even today can boast of certain concrete achievements. Which of these do you feel are healthy or meaningful?

Xiang Biao: It is indeed more meaningful to unpack the China narrative and look at specific issues. For example, if we compare our levels of economy and life expectancy with those of India, then China's results are better. But now, China's overall situation in terms of public health and education is facing new crises. The number of children that drop out of school is quite high, and education in the villages has run into many difficulties. When we look at successful experiences and stress that these are *Chinese* experiences, *Chinese* characteristics, then what was China doing in the four thousand years before we achieved these successes? How did we wind up so backward? What are the reasons behind our current success and why is education again in crisis, we have to look at all of this historically. All of this is happening in China, and there are lots of Chinese elements involved, but you cannot conclude that the results we get are because *China did it*. There are many factors working together in the context of China. Social science tries to disentangle these elements and look at them one by one, to figure out which are the core elements.

One way to unpack the China narrative into specific questions is through comparison, for instance comparing China's success with that of South Korea, one of the original "Four Asian Dragons," or with Europe. Europe may not be handling things particularly well at the moment, while China can mobilize an entire province or the entire country to get something done, which is impressive. But the thing is that you also have to think about next year, about what effect your way of doing things will have ten years on. Europe is more mature about this. It's true that there are protests and demonstrations every day, and people complain constantly, but this is what Europe is, and it is also a form of political wisdom. It may well be that no Chinese would want to be Prime Minister of Britain, who gets yelled at all day, every day. It's unpleasant, and no one sings your praises. But the politicians seem to enjoy it, and feel

like responding to the challenges of their political enemies is an occasion to test their political wisdom. Chinese culture would have a hard time accepting this. But this is what life is, right? In your family life you can't have projects or achievements every day; every morning you talk about what's for breakfast, and one person chooses soy milk while the other eats a doughnut.

The other way of unpacking the China narrative has to do with the method of evaluation. How do we decide what "success" is? From whose point of view? In what time frame? For example, the debate between Qin Hui* (b. 1953) and Lü Xinyu* (b. 1965) on slums is valuable.[1] Our cities don't have slums, which is a great achievement for China, but from a farmer's perspective, a slum is one more life possibility, a step toward the city, which does not exist without the ghetto. If you look at India and the Philippines, slums have become an important political force, whereas in China we just demolish whatever we want to demolish, and the cost of living keeps going up, which creates a lot of pressure. This is part of an intellectual's training, to not get overexcited about something without understanding it. If we say China's cities are well-run, then we also have to ask: Where are the people that used to be there, and what do they think about all this? Why were similar people in other countries not moved out of the slums? We have to look at things from both sides.

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[1] Translator's note: Qin Hui is a liberal historian who has written a great deal about China's exploitation of migrant labor. One of his arguments is that the absence of slums in China's cities—in comparison with other developing countries—was yet another obstacle faced by peasants who might want to leave the villages for a better life, and would settle in slums as their most affordable option. Lü Xinyu, a New Left specialist in Media Studies, argued that China should improve living conditions in the villages instead of allowing urban slums. The two figures engaged in a very public debate on the subject in the early 2010s.

Using the 1980s to Critique the 1980s

Wu Qi: The background to globalization also has a domestic context, in other words, everyone's unreserved embrace of and expectations for the discourse of opening and modernization might be related to what we talked about when discussing the 1980s, which may be a more recent starting point. Your description of the changes in Chinese society and thought since the 1980s is different from some mainstream views in China. Many people have a certain nostalgia for the 1980s, seeing it as a sort of golden age, especially compared to where we are today in the twenty-first century, with the passing of the humanistic spirit and the Enlightenment, with intellectuals having been pushed from the center to the margins, falling from the altar of the gods. This is how those intellectuals tell the story. But from another perspective, in terms of popular opinion, with the spread of Internet technology, the debate is still possible, and even more, people can express their opinion. This perspective seems to challenge intellectuals' nostalgia for the 1980s, which is also backed up by the rise of Trump and populism. What went into your understanding of the 1980s?

Xiang Biao: My view of the 1980s was basically emotional, something like when Lu Xun*[1] (1881–1936) said "my heart could not but be suspicious." "Suspicious" is a lovely word, I like it a lot. I also like Hu Shi's*[2] (1891–1962) style a lot. He's a British-style empiricist and pragmatist. Once, Gao Pingzi's*[3] (1888–1970) grandson told Hu Shi that he wanted to carry forward Zhang Zai's* (1020–1077) vision of "building up the manifestations of Heaven and Earth's spirit, building up good life for the people, developing the endangered scholarship of past sages, and opening up eternal peace for the world."[4] Hu Shi asked him to explain what he meant by "building up the manifestations of Heaven and Earth's spirit," and told him that his grandfather was an astronomer and that he should not use incomprehensible language like that. For Hu Shi, words have to have some empirical basis, and words like Zhang's are empty, nothing more than fleeting emotions. On this question, I feel really grateful to the New Left scholar Wang Hui (b. 1959). The conscious distance I took from the 1980s is to a large degree the result of his influence. He lived through that period, and not as an elitist. He believes that intellectuals should unite with workers and peasants and follow the mass line*.

I am happy to know that we are having this debate today. I think the original mass line was too romanticized and not well implemented, which means that we don't have successful examples to follow now, but we should practice the mass line in today's intellectual and artistic work because when you look at the degree of social media penetration and the educational level we have achieved, it is no longer the same "mass" as before. At present intellectuals are not doing their job well. It is not feasible to completely rely on the masses in intellectual and artistic work, because we still need tools and guides. We do not have to lead them, necessarily, but they have to be organized, like into groups and subgroups, with topics for everyone to discuss.

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[1] Translator's note: Lu Xun is considered modern China's most talented writer.

[2] Translator's note: Hu Shi was a well-known scholar and politician in Republican China, known as a pragmatist and a promoter of Westernization.

[3] Translator's note: Gao Pingzi is considered the founder of modern astronomy in China.

[4] Translator's note: Zhang Zai was a Confucian scholar and politician. This passage is taken from Zhang's "Western Inscription," often considered a concise summary of Neoconfucianism.

Wu Qi: Could you be a bit more specific on how the "culture craze" wound up being separated from life practice?

Xiang Biao: It sounds funny when you say that, because in the 1980s there were so many intellectual debates, so much "thought," and many intellectuals today are nostalgic for the excitement of the 1980s. I am not going to deny the importance of all of that, but at the same time would like to remind everyone that at present it is not worth it to bring back the fervor of the 1980s. What we need to engage in now is a reflection that is much more down-to-earth, much more concrete. We need to link up directly with mass experience, an analysis of the political economy, with our understanding of technology. If we think about Wang Yuanhua's*[5] (1920–2008) characterization of the early 1990s as a time of "deem-phasizing intellectual thought and promoting academic research," then looking at it now, it seems that it is entirely possible to bring thought and academic research together. Indeed, today's thought must be based on professional investigation and research, as well as careful reflection. In fact, it all comes down to being clear on what has actually happened, and not what we should do; I don't really buy the so-called top-down design theory, because it's too hard to do. When politicians are doing important strategic planning, they of course need judgment and a sense of direction, but this is not really top-down design, but instead just a good grasp of strategy. The word Wang Hui uses to describe the 1980s debates among intellectuals is "gesture." I think this is an apt description, in that there really are a lot of us who are constantly making gestures, arriving at big conclusions without having explained what happened clearly.

Wu Qi: Where did things go off the rails?

Xiang Biao: Intellectuals in the 1980s were a lot like educated youth. As I wrote in my "The Age of Educated Youth," "educated youth" did not in fact refer to educated young people, but more primarily to youth educated in big and middle-sized cities, and finally, they represent some-thing close to the idea of "children of high-level cadres." When we say the word "educated youth," everyone immediately thinks of the youth of Beijing and Shanghai. There are many things here that have been completely blown out of proportion, like the stories that have circulated for many years of female educated youth that were raped by village cadres.

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[5] Translator's note: Wang Yuanhua was a well-respected intellectual who served the Party for much of his life, becoming more "liberal" in the most-Mao period. He was an inspiration to many Chinese intellectuals active in the 1980s.

Rape is of course a crime, but there's a reason that stories like those have lingered, and that has to do with the relationship between the countryside and the cities, a narrative on the suffering of the educated youth. Female educated youth are portrayed as the purest of things, and when they were despoiled by village cadres, it was the most beautiful thing being destroyed by the vilest thing.

Many of the questions people thought about in the 1980s were very important, and given the place in history occupied by the period, the fervor was normal and valuable. At the time people talked about an "intellectual realm," which meant, in my understanding, that at the time, there was no division between the state and the intellectual world, and the most important thing was the divisions that appeared within the intellectual elites themselves. The reason for that was that elites at the time were indulging more and more in gestures, for example, the debate in the Shanghai *World Economic Herald**[6] over whether the entire public ownership system should be abolished, which from the standpoint of practicality made no sense.

Wu Qi: This is a lot like today when everyone thinks that populism means the rise of the masses, but in fact behind populism are the elites, and all of this is a new struggle within the world of the elites. If we were to cut our ties with the world of elite gestures, and take leave of the established world of intellectuals and their cultural circles, what position should we take up?

Xiang Biao: There are still some differences. In the 1980s, everyone thought that intellectuals represented the wisdom of the people. There was a strong moral tint to things, and intellectuals were speaking in the place of the state. Now intellectuals feel like they are just another social group out to make money and have a good life. They are not trying to represent anyone. Beginning in the 1990s intellectuals were increasingly marginalized, and were no longer spiritual leaders. At the time I had just entered university and learned the word "disenchantment," which meant that people who had been talking about spiritual excitement were now more realistic, which is a general trend within modernity. A typical example was Liu Zaifu* (b. 1941), the writer who said that in the United States, everyone believed that basketball players were more

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[6] Translator's note: The *World Economic Herald* was an independent newspaper which for a certain period enjoyed the support of certain CCP leaders, which gave the journal the latitude to publish quite daring opinion pieces.

important than university professors, and at the airport, everyone asked basketball players and celebrities for their autograph. Liu thought this was a good thing, an example of commercialization increasing democratic participation. At the time I sympathized with this view because I disliked pretentious posturing.

But today, we are not only marginalized but also isolated. At the time, my expectations were that, with marginalization, intellectuals would become more organic, would no longer be purely abstract intellectuals, and would have specific statuses. Being organic is being limited. It must be linked to society in specific ways and cannot stay at the level of general theories. We have not seen many such connections taking place, instead, we've gotten more narrow and more specialized. The Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) said that truly organic intellectuals were technicians, or people who promote agricultural technology, or barefoot doctors, or subaltern writers, who indeed can do a lot. Today it is difficult for university professors, including myself, to produce an accurate understanding and description of society. The real insiders are the people who can provide immediate insight into problems. Delivery people, for example, have to think through many issues too. There are people like that, there are vehicles such as social media to convey what they think, and we should encourage them to write more.

Wu Qi: So for you, what is the spiritual heritage of the 1980s?

Xiang Biao: For me, the spiritual heritage of the 1980s was all of those slogans, the bold, skeptical attitudes, and dispositions, and the demands for institutional and structural change. It came from a spiritually deep place and was based on foundational principles, a feeling that current reality had to be transcended, and needed to be changed. It had the feeling of Mao's poem, when he talked about "pointing to our mountains and rivers, setting people afire with our words."[7] Without that baptism, without that body of spiritual wealth, I don't think I would feel much about this kind of macro-narrative. Those kinds of things excite us easily. Of course, this is two-sided, and it's hard to say if it's a good thing or a bad thing. Especially if we want to compare ourselves to Western scholars, the good side is that we want to see big pictures, will not be satisfied with a simple explanation of the status quo, and will always make systemic criticisms, but at the same time, this attitude means that we lose the ability

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[7] Translator's note: The passage is taken from Mao's poem "Changsha," written in 1925.

to observe reality in a more precise way since we're always in a hurry to arrive at a more abstract narrative.

The bigger question is, why did this spiritual heritage not congeal into something more lasting? Why did it not become a good ecological system for the production of knowledge? The styles of the 1980s were too homogenous, and instead of coming together with others, they wiped one another out. It's like Beida's "heroic" view of itself. Self-heroism is fine, but it has to exist in a dialogue with other people to become a healthy ecosystem. If everyone is running around "setting people afire with their words," we'll burn everything down and it will all come to nothing.

Wu Qi: Could we say that your own research has always kept a certain distance from the main themes of the 1980s?

Xiang Biao: This is true in terms of specific research topics, but from another angle, without the 1980s' fix on the world, I could not have hopped on the public bus to Muxiyuan to do *Zhejiang Village* in my second year of university, in the middle of the winter, which was a kind of romantic thing to do, one that I wouldn't have done had I been thinking realistically. The 1980s influence on me is still important, that kind of impulse, a dissatisfaction with the status quo, the urge to do something to shock people. It is mainly a spiritual disposition, without much methodological or theoretical value.

Wu Qi: This is a supplement to your argument against elitism, and not a complete denial, right?

Xiang Biao: That feeling of transcendence, the idea that we could criticize our teachers, all of that was the spirit of the 1980s, otherwise we would not have engaged in our criticism, and would have just gone to make money. Most people see the 1980s as idealistic, and I think that's a pretty good term for it, because what we call idealism is first a form of transcendence, and the value of existence lies in transcending the status quo, seeking after things that don't exist in front of your eyes. In this sense, when I use the spirit of the 1980s to critique the 1980s, it is also a kind of revolt, or transcendence, or ideal. In concrete terms it's about being bold, not obeying authority, which was the 1980s, and maybe Beida as well.

What is Criticism?

Wu Qi: In what specific ways has Wang Hui influenced you? Which scholars have had the most influence on you?

Xiang Biao: In terms of specific questions, such as how to view the 1980s, as well as in terms of broader significance, Wang Hui's perspective and his new way of thinking were a source of inspiration for me. He is a scholar with a firm and distinct viewpoint, and this viewpoint is not a simple posture or some kind of label. He is open-minded in his analysis, and he makes no judgments based on preconceptions. In addition, he particularly emphasizes getting inside of history and has a very sensitive and lively way of entering into a dialogue with history. So watching how he works and how he thinks has been enlightenment for me.

Prasenjit Duara[1] also had a fairly big influence on me. Duara first got interested in China because of the story of the early Chinese revolutionary Peng Pai* (1896–1929), and wondered why someone from a landlord background could betray his own class, return home, divide the land, and carry out land reform. Actually, Duara's first degree was in business, he was raised in a fairly well-off family, has loved music all his life, and became interested in intellectual questions after he had quite a bit of life exposure. It took time. His journey is something that we can learn from.

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[1] Translator's note: Duara is an Indian-born historian of China who currently teaches at Duke University in the United States.

A third person that influenced me a lot is Vani, my friend from Singapore. She is a lot older than I am, she's in her sixties and has no proper job. She used to be the editor of a journal, and helped to edit my *Zhejiang Village* book as well as *Global "Body Shopping."* Her greatest help and inspiration to me was to help me to see how ideas and knowledge can be so lively. She is not a specialized scholar, but has a keen interest in geography, plants, pharmaceutical knowledge, as well as philosophy and art, and has a lot to say about current political and economic issues. Her views always come naturally and hit the mark, and are full of critical curiosity about the world. She constantly alerted me that there are different angles from which to look at things. She is quite a unique person. She abandoned all material pursuits, and the joy she takes in life and her appreciation of art allowed me to see the importance of art.

Wu Qi: Tell me about the importance of art.

Xiang Biao: I was lucky enough to study painting when I was young, so I have a bit of grounding in that, but I know nothing about music, which is a shortcoming, and it is something that is hard to learn once you are an adult. Music is probably linked to mathematics, because both transcend culture and language, which is why people like the German philosopher Schopenhauer (1788–1860) felt that music embodies the internal structure of the mind of humanity. Why is it that everyone feels that certain music is harmonious, like Chopin's piano concertos, if it is not a question of the internal structure of the human mind? Musical training can be quite important to mental and psychological health. The writer Eva Hoffman (b. 1945) studied piano as a child, and she argues that piano was very valuable in learning about accuracy, because there is no way to hide even the slightest error when playing piano, and if the rhythm is even slightly off nothing works. This is like math. Yet a foundation of rigor and precision provides a great deal of space for improvisation and can lead to mental relaxation. This is a kind of beauty that is beyond language. I put a lot of stress on accuracy and rigor, which are important to social science, creative writing, and non-fiction writing, and in the absence of accurate techniques, it is hard to produce anything that is artistic or creative. Everything is produced little by little, so we need to pay attention to the material process of production.

"Material" includes what space you are in, what tea you drink, and what kind of paper you use. I think it was the historian Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) who said that things that look really big, like global, long-distance commerce, are in fact made up of small links. Zheng He's*

(1371–1433) voyages[2] were the same thing so that China's travel to East Africa did not involve an abstract China and an abstract Africa; the ships involved had to visit a lot of shores, proceeding one step at a time, so you have to look at the entire material process. If you think about it this way, it's a fairly good way to work and a good attitude toward life.

Art is somewhat similar to the legal system, and the way lawyers work. When I was a kid I found the whole lawyer thing really strange. If it is clear that the guy is guilty, why do we need a lawyer to defend him? But the idea of a "defense" is really important, in the sense that we have to assume that we do not know what happened, and through the process of "defense" the truth comes out, and we may discover that our initial conclusions were wrong! Scholarship is the same. You can't rely on intuition to make judgments, but have to prove your points, and show how you reached your conclusions. Often it is the case that the clearer the conclusion, the harder it is to prove, but once you have proven it, then you've made a big contribution. For example, how do you prove that one plus one equals two? Why do you need to prove it? But once you've proven it and illustrated the process involved, it will have an influence on lots of basic theory.

Of course, I don't want to overemphasize procedural justice, because I have discovered, in the process of doing fieldwork, that procedural justice can be used and even manipulated by people with legal resources, but I accept it as a basic concept. Only if you accept the result because of the process can you establish a substantive relationship with the result, even if you still have doubts. Research and life are also like this, always processes of open dialogue. Research means participating in a dialogue, changing the form of the dialogue, raising new questions in the course of the dialogue—this process itself is the most important.

Wu Qi: You mentioned a lot of left-wing scholars and ideas, but in your previous interviews and arguments, my impression is that you did not use the term "left-wing" explicitly. Maybe this has to do with the way in which you express yourself, in that you don't talk a lot about your own viewpoint. Is it that you have not had the chance to do so, or that you prefer not to make that kind of statement?

Xiang Biao: First, I feel like there is no need to talk about a general left-wing standpoint. I have never felt the need, nor had the ability, to

[2] Translator: Zheng He led a series of maritime voyages to Southeast Asia, India, and even East Africa in the early fifteenth century.

position myself on a broad intellectual spectrum. What I'm good at is getting into an issue concretely, finding a window, and seeing contradictions. So in my view, how you think has to do with specific questions and with your object of study. The way I work is to look at contradictions in the thing itself, the type of contradictions that affect actors but which the actors can't explain to themselves sufficiently. This is how I try to engage myself.

Wu Qi: When you are trying to understand or when you are getting into the problem, sometimes you can't help having to choose the perspective or standpoint of one side or the other, or you may unconsciously identify with a particular side. What do you do in situations like that?

Xiang Biao: If it's a conflict between the weak and the strong, obviously everyone sympathizes with the weak. Because my specialty is fieldwork and social analysis, where a key concept is "relationships," what I emphasize is not that the weak deserve protection. What is more important is why the weak are weak, which obviously is the same question as why the strong are strong, which has to be the result of a historical process. As a citizen or as a person, in my conclusions, I take the side of the weak, but in fact, what I spend most of my time on is not taking sides. For example, the weak may have a lot of flaws—I say this not to criticize them—these are limitations imposed on them by history, which need to be fully understood too.

Wu Qi: Then what about the critical nature of research?

Xiang Biao: The Frankfurt School was obviously important; it shows that a central element of critical theory is not to explain things away. It's the opposite—when people think there is no problem, theory, by explaining things, allows people to discover that there are problems here, and the idea is to explain more and more of them. Of course, you want to explain complex things in simple ways, so that everyone can understand. There is no point in making things more and more complicated, but at the same time, you also want to explain the internal contradictions and latent problems in a situation that at first seemed to be unproblematic, illustrating things that don't make sense. Here, "criticism" does not mean calling out a group for having done something wrong, in the sense of moral responsibility; instead, you are challenging our current state of knowledge. The "knowledge" that we carry around in our heads is necessarily mainstream knowledge, which means that we need to be self-critical as well.

Wu Qi: When I was in university, I was very influenced by critical theory, an influence that affected a lot of my later choices, but more recently I have started to feel like the voices of the older generation of critical intellectuals is starting to lose touch with younger groups. It's like this generation of young people does not want to get too close to that world, or maybe doesn't know how. Here maybe there is a need for critical theory to be self-critical.

Xiang Biao: Can you be a bit more specific about what the problem is? Are they concerned about other things, or are they choosing different approaches?

Wu Qi: I think it has to do with what they are concerned about. For example, when academics talk about something that happened in Latin America or the Middle East, young people think, "Why do they care about Latin America? That has nothing to do with me personally." So they don't see the point. When I interviewed Professor Dai Jinhua, she mentioned that she was giving up on communicating with young people, because she discovered a huge fissure between her and them in the sense that their individualism has become too pronounced, to the point that they cannot develop empathy for other people, and see them only as tools to be used. My view is not quite so extreme, but I do feel that the framework has changed, and that people around me don't talk about other people or about ideas like equality and fairness, or that it is no longer natural to talk about such things. People talk about love, but more and more this means their love life, and things like family feelings are becoming a relic or a burden from the premodern period.

Xiang Biao: This is something I would like to know more about, meaning what it is that young people are thinking about these days. First, self-perceptions and public consciousness are linked. Sometimes the link is not clear, and you have to look for it. Let's take the example of the idea of a "loser,"[3] which is a negative self perception, and is completely based in the ideology of equality. The loser says, "I'm a failure, which makes me a loser, but it's not that I'm incompetent, and instead that society treats me unfairly. So I accept what I am, but I make fun of society." So behind any definition, an individual gives himself there is always a public consciousness involved. There may be positive energy in this, and I want to find the positive energy.

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[3] Translator's note: The word Xiang uses for "loser," *diaosi**, is recently coined Internet slang, and is part of the "melancholy" outlook of Chinese young people discussed above.

We really cannot discuss equality or love in an abstract sense, because they are concrete, and you have to start with a particular lived experience. There have to be principles involved in love, but if you just talk about the principles in the absence of the concrete situation it quickly gets meaningless. Recently, the *Sichuan Daily* published an article by an invited commentator who is worried that there are too many "leftover women,"[4] and urged them not to be too picky or too romantic, otherwise they will never find a partner, and the BBC included the article in their international news. At the same time, people in the marriage market are very calculating. This is shocking for people of my age. We never thought about such things when we were dating in university. Young people today think love is something sublime, and they are eager to throw themselves into it, but they feel lost in reality, because they are concerned with this or that practical issue. So love becomes fragile, like a beautiful glass ball that can break anytime. If we can offer some language that will help them to grasp the complexity of their lives and see the contradictions clearly, such analyses can enter into their lives and perhaps be of some help.

For example, Plato says that love allows you to return to your original human state. This original self was made up of two parts that combined to constitute a personality. The two parts later split, and love allows you to find the other half. This sounds very romantic, but it is consistent with much anthropological thinking. Modern individualism believes that life starts with the individual, after which comes groups and society, but Durkheim and Mauss believe that this is a limited Western view and that many societies elsewhere in the world do not think this way at all. First, there are totems, and symbols of the group that define the group as a whole, and only after the group is defined is the individual acknowledged. Individual consciousness comes from group consciousness, which means that group consciousness is the prerequisite for individual consciousness and not its result. When Australian aboriginal groups count cattle, they don't count them one by one. The meaning of "one" is one group of cattle, one tribe, and an individual within a tribe is a small "one." Plato's concept of love also suggests that the self was always incomplete, and needs to join with other subjects.

The French philosopher Alain Badiou (b. 1937) also gave us an interesting tool. He argues that love is making an accidental occurrence into

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[4] Translator's note: The term is *shengnü**, a generally derogatory way to refer to unmarried women.

something sustainable, which makes love into a daily job. In the beginning, it may have been love at first sight, but you have to nourish that initial flame. This leads you into issues of daily life, and mortgages, and how to take care of aging parents, all of which has to do with political economy and society, and are thoroughly public. So from here, you can start to branch out and talk about your relationship with other groups.

You truly cannot force people to discuss social issues. If you suddenly try to discuss things with young people that they are not yet aware of, they have every reason to be annoyed. Are young people really not interested in important issues? The enthusiasm for the play *Che Guevara*[5] in 2000 vividly reflected young people's need for a new discourse, a new social imaginary. But the problem is that a lot of the dialogue and discussion in the play was problematic. For example, in the play they said that post-modernism and feminism were reactionary Western things. The problem is not that they misunderstood feminism, but rather that this kind of abstract side-taking when engaging in criticism is problematic. If you want to talk about oppression, then what is the longest-lasting, most universal oppression humankind has known? Gender-based oppression. In a dialogue with the audience, the playwright Huang Jisu* (b. 1955) said "since we're talking about Che Guevara, who cares if you are a man or a woman!" Everyone applauded. The audience was moved by the abstract idea of "oppression," without considering that in reality, oppression always occurs in specific forms, including gender-based oppression, age-based oppression…

The other day I heard an interesting example: in some Indian villages, poor people can dig wells, and rich people can also dig wells, so on the surface, it looks like there is no oppression, but there is an unspoken rule that rich people can dig wells twice as deep as poor people. So in times of drought, all of the underground water goes to the rich people, and poor people only have water when water is already abundant. Details concerning the depth of the wells are important, and only when we have done the research to figure out what myths or superstitions implanted these details and given them meaning will we understand what oppression is.

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[5] Translator's note: "Che Guevara" was produced by a group of Chinese artists with financial support from private enterprises, and created a sensation throughout the country. Some praised it as a landmark achievement that revived the revolutionary genre of art, while others criticized it as crude propaganda.

There are lots of stories like this, for example, in Wenzhou, before the revolution, one particular body of fishermen were a special group, and could not inter-marry with the peasants, except in cases when the peasants were extremely poor. Women from the group of fishermen wore clothes that had to be buttoned in a different way from what was normal, so that everyone could see, even from far away, that she was a member of an underclass. That's how extreme things were. So we have to talk about concrete things like that, and figure out why divisions were so absolute in that kind of society, to the point of intentionally including clothing and hairstyles. Even if it is something quite distant from us, once you get the details right, I believe that everyone, both young and old, will enjoy listening to it, because now it is a story. The fiery language eventually cools off, but these kinds of concrete stories lodge themselves in people's brains and slowly change the way people feel about life.

Empathetic Scholarship

Wu Qi: You place a lot of emphasis on "empathetic scholarship." In fact, in daily life and in academic research we often try to understand others across different positions, but the results sometimes leave people frustrated, and some people finally even declare that understanding is impossible. What are your views?

Xiang Biao: I would say the opposite. Understanding is natural, and not difficult, although we often consciously or unconsciously refuse to understand. The key is how to avoid refusing to understand. Think about it—don't we often feel that when we're with friends it is easy to arrive at an understanding, but with those that are closest to us, such as our parents, understanding is harder? This makes me think: do they really not understand? Do they really not know what you are thinking? My feeling is that of course they know, and it is not that they don't understand, in fact they are completely capable of understanding, but they simply refuse. Typical examples are decisions concerning sexual orientation and marriage. She wants to marry him or he wants to marry her—what's not to understand? But for property considerations, or what the neighbors will think, or for reasons touching their own position in society, they refuse to understand something that is in fact very easy to understand. Understanding is a part of everyone's basic nature, and as a psychological mechanism is not difficult at all, and if you say something is hard to understand, it is in fact a question of position, in other words, whether

you are willing to put yourself in the other's place. There are many situations in which people refuse to do this because there are personal interests at stake.

In this sense, I feel like academic research is not hard to do. In "empathetic scholarship," you don't necessarily have to draw out your research subject's psychological mechanisms like a psychoanalyst would. Everything is a question of position—you have to describe the social position in which they find themselves and describe the set of relationships and the particular world in which they are, at which point everyone will naturally understand. In this sense, understanding is merely shared subjectivity. Understanding must be based on sufficient knowledge, which is in turn based on empirical investigation. If I really want to understand you, then a casual chat is not enough, because I have no idea where your feelings come from, so I have to understand your world. This kind of investigation is the first step to true understanding. The mission of research is to understand something through finding something out, and on the basis of this understanding, constructing an explanation, so that after having understood, you know how the larger world is put together, only after which can you begin to answer certain questions. But I have reservations about interpretation. Interpretation means giving meanings to material. In empirical research, I pay more attention to understanding and explanation.

Wu Qi: To be even more specific, in the research process, can you completely understand what you are studying through interviews and observation? Maybe we can use your own research as an example. How do you break through that barrier? For example how do you deal with a situation where someone's words and deeds don't match up?

Xiang Biao: In terms of traditional anthropology, this question is fairly easy to answer, because we used to work mainly on people who did not have their own written language. Since they did not have written history, and much of what they said sounded strange and irrational, so our only useful method was observation. Today, however, words and deeds not matching up is not a problem to break through but rather, as I would put it, a "fact to be embraced." Society is built out of a lot of words and deeds that don't match up. What we want to observe is precisely in what way they don't match up, and not say that in so doing they are trying to fool us. Sometimes they may be fooling themselves. This happens a lot, for instance, people who gamble or take drugs and would like to quit but can't, so often their words and deeds do not match up, which is true for

corrupt officials as well. You cannot argue that his "words" are completely fake, nor his "actions" premeditated—both words and deeds must be seen as part of his behavior.

To give an example, I am currently working on a notorious instance of "urban renewal" in Beijing in November 2017,[1] where there are many examples of conflicts between words and deeds. The Beijing government said they were protecting the migrants' safety when evicting them from makeshift housing, but the migrants were left homeless. The government also decided that, following the demolition of the unsafe buildings, the areas must not be used for commercial redevelopment but should instead be used for building public facilities such as parks. They said that all of this was for the benefit of ordinary people. Was the government simply lying? The key is to analyze specific contradictions, to identify the exact discrepancies between words and actions. The fact that the government talked a lot about safety, means that the government is invested in this language, and we in turn can use this language to push for change. At the same time, we need to see where things went wrong in implementation, and gaps between words and deeds could be the starting points in thinking about what changes are feasible. My preliminary analysis is that the key to understanding the eviction campaign is not entirely that government and urban society discriminate and exclude migrants—which is the view of most people. Contradictions are also found within the government, between different departments, and at different levels, in terms of the use of public land. The cleanup by the central government was in large part a cleanup of local governments' practice of commercializing land use, including the military's practice of renting out space under their control for commercial benefits. These practices provided migrants with temporary accommodations but created other problems such as overcrowding and unsafe living conditions. If you look carefully at how the campaigns evolved over months, first in Shanghai and then in Beijing, you will see that it did not happen suddenly at all. It was a struggle to centralize power over land use, a struggle that started some time ago. There is

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[1] Translator's note: In this instance, the municipal government launched a "campaign-style" attack on migrants living in substandard housing. While the government's treatment of migrant workers had generally grown more tolerant over time, this intervention was both sudden and brutal, and sparked considerable discussion and even protest. A description—and denunciation—of the campaign is available at https://www.readingthechina dream.com/guo-yuhua-original-intentions.html.

no doubt that migrants were victims of the crackdown, but appealing to humanitarian concerns is not sufficient. The questions become: is such power centralization sustainable? How will such centralization affect the migrants in the long run?

Wu Qi: Usually the way we—or the media—deal with problems like that is through anger. Their internal contradictions make us angry, they are clearly using state violence to do things that are wrong, which they then cover up with high-sounding language. So we quickly take a stance against them, and draw a line in the sand. Later on we might discover that this antagonism has made the problem more difficult to solve.

Xiang Biao: So my point is that you have to get inside of all of this and understand the origin of the internal contradictions, and why in those circumstances they would resort of that kind of high-sounding discourse.

Wu Qi: In your view, what kind of social actions can this kind of academic understanding and explanation serve to guide? Or does it need to guide a social movement?

Xiang Biao: It is fairly clear to me that while I do not want to completely dismiss the possibility of social action, still, this is not something that we can plan. I feel that my work is basically intellectual work, and consists of providing tools that help everyone see and think. Especially in today's situation, individuals and young people must themselves decide to take action, and it is not up to us to provide some kind of plan of attack, which is true of all heated social movements. Lenin said that "we are the vanguard," who awaken the masses when they are not yet awakened. But in most situations, the people act first. My feeling is that youth today should not be too precipitous about taking action. More important is that their own daily lives, choices, and orientations need to take on their own voice.

Wu Qi: Talking about voice, two concrete voices occur to me. One is the voice of Lu Xun, whom you have already mentioned, which continues to serve as a direct stimulus among today's youth via the Internet. Another voice is that of the author Fan Yusu*,[2] a voice that, like others, emerges out of society. Voices like hers can quickly evoke a lot of empathy. How do you see these two voices? Is there any relationship between these voices and the academic work you already mentioned where you break through barriers and establish dialogues?

[2] Translator's note: Fan Yusu is a migrant worker who published an account of her difficult, miserable life online in 2017, becoming instantly famous.

Xiang Biao: I don't see much similarity. What I said was that we need to dig out the voices of young people, I meant that we need to refine the wisdom displayed by young people in their everyday lives and allow it to become a voice. Lu Xun's voice is clearly an encouragement and an inspiration that comes from outside of our lives, a resource that can be absorbed into our lives.

Fan Yusu's voice is also important and makes me think of our earlier discussion of centers and margins. Fan Yusu's essays are outstanding and allow everyone to grasp the life experience of people who pass unnoticed, and the more we have of this kind of thing the better. But from another perspective, the fact that Fan's writings evoke empathy has a lot to do with the relationship between the center and the margins—this is my personal reading, I have no proof of this. When I read her writing and the commentary it produced, what I find the most moving is that Fan was always such a talented girl—she memorized the 300 Tang poems when she was little and read *The Dream of the Red Chamber**, and can write things like what she wrote, but she nonetheless wound up in a horrible situation. Most people's concern for her is not for her working life as an ordinary person, but they feel instead like she should have been at the center and instead wound up on the margins, so there's something tragic about her story. Most urban youth, when they read Fan Yusu's writings, do not see an actual life with its pain and struggle, a life that is neither tragic nor comic. Instead, looking from the center, they see a congenial figure at the margin who is full of desire for the center, and in which there are elements of tragedy, thus reinforcing their self-positioning in the center. The words that appear most often in the comments on her writings are "fate" and "refusing to accept fate."

Wu Qi: If we place too much emphasis on "empathy" is it easy to wind up with the view that "if it exists there must be a reason for it?".

Xiang Biao: No. When you see someone who is narrow, violent, someone who even commits crimes and kills people, one view is that this is a bad person, a demon, who was born like this and has always been like this. Another way to look at is to ask: how did they turn out like this? What childhood experience or current life situation might their character be related to? This necessarily leads us to think about the social context, as well as about the person's internal state, their emotional life. This kind of understanding does not mean arguing that we can accept people who are narrow and violent. But it is only through understanding that we finally see what social problem needs to be addressed: you can't just kill

people right away, you have to think about communicating even with "bad" people, otherwise, our only choice with criminals is to let them go or to eliminate them. There is no hope of changing them through education. At the same time, if we understand, we naturally wind up seeing parts of ourselves in the other and might wonder if we are becoming narrow and impatient.

Wu Qi: So when we talk about "depth" in the social sciences, what do we actually mean?

Xiang Biao: "Depth" is always relative; the true reference points are different insights, and the key is the relationship between different insights. "Depth" means accurately grasping reality, and at the same time developing a new, critical understanding of existing insights. This does not mean simplistically overturning other people's understandings, because other people have their own take on things, especially since many points of view have existed for years, and people see value in them, which means that there is something there. So a deep understanding means not only an accurate grasp of the thing you are studying but also an understanding of where previous understandings came up short, which tells you what method to employ when you move on to study something else. "Depth" implies a weighty inter-subjectivity, involving the object of your research, other people, and power relations, so it is a networked ecology, and it requires that you place yourself within the system of knowledge production, which is the only way to achieve depth. Depth is not a matter of deduction. It is ecological, plural, and requires penetration.

Wu Qi: There is another word—we say that people "see through" something. To my mind, this idea seems to suggest that if I have understood something clearly enough then I wind up not caring about it, which means I either embrace it completely or I decide it is meaningless. From my perspective—or maybe it's my age—I cannot completely accept this feeling because I want to believe that things can change. How do you see this?

Xiang Biao: That kind of "seeing through" doesn't really hold water. If it did, then the world could not change, and history would be static. In fact, the world is constantly changing, so how do people who have "seen through" everything explain that? The idea that everything is random and inexplicable goes against history. Depth comes from a networked structure of knowledge, and the cynical defeatist can return to their own little world where they buy their food and cook their dinner and pay attention to nothing else. "Seeing through" is a passive solution, one that seeks to

maintain life with minimum engagement, but the person who lives this way is no longer thinking. This turns the living network of life into a dead end.

Oxford Interview, August 2018

Setting the Stage

Wu Qi: Continuing the conversation we started in Beijing, there are many issues we still need to unpack. I was recently reading *Politics and Letters*, the *New Left Review*'s interview with the writer Raymond Williams (1921–1988), which is divided up quite neatly. There are parts where he only talks about his parents and his family life, in which he simply narrates what happened, and there are parts where he talks only about his work, but that sort of style doesn't really fit our conversation. This is not quite how you operate, because you often jump from talking about your personal life to more academic questions, and to me this approach is important in and of itself. For example, last time when you were talking about Wenzhou, the question of the local gentry came up, and when you were talking about your time at Beida, you talked about your evolution as a person, so that both personal and scholarly aspects had their place in the dialogue. This interview is meant to supplement the first one, delving more deeply into some of the major themes that already came up, so I thought I would go back to the first interview instead of seeking out new topics. This may mean that we jump around a bit from question to question instead of following the course of your life as we did last time. Is this all right with you?

Xiang Biao: That's great. It can make the book seem more like a multi-act play, which I think can be more effective, because the final impression it delivers will not be a straight flight toward a recognized destination, and more like a superposition of images. This way people can see the

links between different experiences, and more readily grasp the questions or themes, which can spark discussion. If this sort of convergence winds up being one of the main features of the book, that would please me a lot. How to problematize personal experience, or how to go from experience to a scholarly question, is already an issue in itself. We can add to what we talked about last time. I mean, there is already a fair bit of material, so we can choose what we found to be worthwhile or interesting and problematize it a bit more so that the theory stands out more clearly.

Social science should help people observe the world, or navigate the world, through analysis. It is not like the natural sciences, which solve problems by discovering the laws of nature. In fact, social science is sort of the reverse of that, in that it tells you that in fact there are no definite rules, and instead everything depends on how you understand the world, how you decide to take action. You may have a big picture of how the world works, but there is nothing you would call a law. So social science uses a scientific attitude to sift through the evidence, collect materials, and see things clearly, but ultimately what it does is give you the tools you need to create a new reality or to change reality. So social science first has to do with you, and only later with society.

Wu Qi: Recently, young people really feel the need for help and guidance from older generations, but our teachers, and the older generations in general, seem to be slowly retiring from public discourse, it is getting harder and harder for young people to find organizers, mediators, protectors, and leaders even in the small worlds of academics and culture.

Xiang Biao: My counsel is not to look for iconic leadership. Leaders who know how to mobilize, excite, and encourage people to move forward are quickly transformed into icons or symbols, after which they are easily used by other people, because once you become a symbol you are a material thing, like money. We have to resist this transformation into things and symbols, and insist that leadership be a process, a kind of practice.

This has to do with the overall system. As you just said, leadership can mean protection, but this can be dangerous. If you look at leadership in universities now, it is true that they are protecting their subordinates, but this is also how they obtain resources. The university leaders are intermediaries between the system and university scholars. This is very different from what I meant by intellectual intermediaries. Intellectual intermediaries work between scholars, and between scholars and the population in general, and blend different ideas together to shape public discussions.

These are intermediaries in a horizontal sense, not vertical. So we should not expect leaders to protect us, nor should we expect the system to protect us. What is most important is to be able to form a community of our own. In China, whether or not you can get something done depends on how determined you are, and if you have this kind of small-scale unity, you can be enough of a pest to succeed. You should not expect any one person to shield you from problems; everyone should confront difficulties together.

Our society has a strong tendency to turn people into icons and symbols—this big university, that famous person—many people get lost in this. Young people should have the courage to ask: "What is this for?" "What is good about this university, and what does that mean to me?" Whether a person is famous or not, first check out what he says. An icon relies on everyone's support, and once the support disappears, so does the icon. Our education has filled our minds with icons and symbols, and to move past this, we need to ask obvious questions and speak in a natural voice. This may take time.

Impressions of Oxford

Wu Qi: What are your most important impressions of Oxford?

Xiang Biao: I don't have any real emotional investment in Oxford. For me, the best thing about Oxford is the freedom it offers, plus the fact that it is very decentralized. There is in fact no Oxford University, as many people have said, because there are all of these colleges and departments, and the relationships between them are like the vertical and horizontal lines of authority in the Chinese government system. The departments are like vertical arrangements of functional departments, like China's civil affairs department, or the finance department, or the national defense department. The colleges are horizontal arrangements, like Beijing municipality or Zhejiang province. Every college has people from different departments in it, and all professors at the university belong to one of the colleges. The legal status of the colleges is communal, and they are owned by all members of the college. Although it will never happen, members of a college could vote to sell the buildings, and then divide up the money and go home, and the college would cease to exist.

The colleges basically are places for undergraduates to take courses. For example, my college has two or three economists, who might recruit five or six students every year, who will do individual tutorials with these professors.

For undergraduates, the tutorials are the key, and they work well. When I ask students what the best thing about tutorials is, they say that it is that

they cannot hide. If they understood something, they understood it, and if they didn't, they didn't, at which point the tutor would keep after them until they finally got it. And if there was some big thing that they just could not understand, then they would read more on that subject, either by modifying the reading lists or taking different courses. They have to turn in an essay every week, which is a lot of work. The major point of the essays is not to convey information, but instead to learn to build an argument, so the essay is also evaluated in terms of structure, grammar, and rhetoric. Sometimes they even read the essay aloud to the professor and engage in free discussion about it. This kind of training is truly good, and students arrive at an understanding of the subject that goes way beyond the level of textbook understanding. With their professor, they discuss where this or that theory came from, why the author adopted this or that interpretation at the time, and how we should understand it now. As soon as you hear a student who has been trained this way talk, you can sense their fundamental grasp of the issue and its history. When you understand the history of knowledge, knowledge takes on another life, becoming lively and interesting, and at the same time it opens up, inviting you to change it in light of current circumstances.

Social activities and eating together are another function of the colleges. Since the colleges are transdisciplinary, the person sitting to your left may be studying math, the one to your right biology, and the one across from you history. You talk about everything under the sun. My understanding of the Chinese artist Xu Bing* (b. 1955) came completely from two people who were at my college, one who was working on the history of art and the other on South African literature. The one working on South African literature compared Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* with Xu Bing's art installation "A Book from the Sky,"[1] which was the first time I had ever heard of Xu Bing. And the person working on the history of art invited Xu Bing to put together an exhibition at Oxford, when I finally met him.

The atmosphere at Oxford is great, but is not necessarily on the front lines of research. I wanted a place where I could feel at ease thinking about my own little world. Had I gone to the United States, I might

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[1] Translator's note: "A Book from the Sky" was an art installation displaying books and other printed matter in which Xu Bing used characters that looked like Chinese characters but were instead his own inventions. At first glance, or at a distance, the installation looks familiar and "traditional," but the impact is eventually somewhat disturbing.

not have been quite at ease, because they are always trying to be on the front lines, to be number one. It's easy to get carried away, and wind up "innovating" just to "innovate." Many social questions are old questions, and you have to get to the bottom of old questions. Constantly making up new buzzwords is tiresome.

Talking about language is something that matters a lot to me, particularly the corruption of language. A lot of the language academics use these days has absolutely nothing to do with social experience, and most people do not know what they are talking about, but they keep spouting the same nonsense. In this sense, Oxford has had a big impact on me, because it is seen as vulgar, in bad taste, to talk like this. Someone who knows their stuff should be able to explain complex principles in simple language, and the simpler the better. A table is a table, a bench is a bench, and a coffee table is a coffee table.

This has to do with Oxford's empiricist philosophy. For example, Isaiah Berlin's scholarly writings were published as essays. Oxford doesn't like standard academic writing. They believe that even the most sophisticated scholarship should be conveyed in everyday language, avoiding technical terms as much as possible, and using concepts that are easily understood, as in Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty*. His prose is descriptive, although he uses metaphors now and again, like the hedgehog and the fox. He has certain images in his head and he put words to the images. These days, many of us have no images in our heads, and we just mechanically spit out data or material.

Another thing is Oxford's self-confidence. I can't pull it off, but it looks like fun. Britain basically has no private universities, and Oxford and Cambridge are both public, like Beida and Tsinghua. Superficially, it looks like the government runs Oxford, but in fact, Oxford runs the government. Everybody in the government went to Oxford. Governments change all the time; universities don't. For example, my college, St. Hugh's, was originally a woman's college, and Aung San Suu Kyi (b. 1945) and Theresa May (b. 1956) both graduated from there. In some of the old colleges, high-ranking politicians and people in the government come to Oxford for the weekend and talk politics with undergraduates.

Isaiah Berlin originally worked on classical philosophy, and the fact that his thought had such an impact on the world, later on, was not merely because of his contribution to philosophy, but instead was due to his detailed insights and judgments of world politics, which he explained

through philosophy. His use of the idea of "two concepts of liberty" in fact was aimed at the debate between the East and the West at the beginning of the Cold War. "Negative freedom" means leaving me alone; "positive freedom" means I have a project I want to pursue. When Berlin was a student, he would go on the weekend to listen to the debates between members of parliament and the Prime Minister in the college: Should we appease Germany? Should we talk to Hitler? What should be our policy toward the Soviet Union? From Chamberlain to Churchill, all of the debates were hands-on.

The elements of Isaiah Berlin's style, linking real debates to theories, came out of an environment like Oxford's. In fact, the function of a university is precisely to provide a safe environment to allow you to think things through. People's personal experiences bear this out, and Oxford is famous for its diversity of thought among its undergraduates. University gives you this kind of safe space, allowing you to wonder about things, to experience things. I don't really agree with the idea that intellectuals should be moral exemplars or life models. I don't think this is their mission. Especially today, when the distinction between what we call intellectuals and those who are not intellectuals is so fuzzy. If this is the case, why would you be a model just because you work at a university? I feel like the mission of people who work at universities is not to create norms, but to create exceptions. Our society needs exceptions, and those working in universities should provide them. But now it seems like all university professors in China are marching in lockstep, which turns a lot of people off. First, there is nothing particularly exalted about a university professor. Second, they are set off by the fact that they get to say things that other people don't quite dare to say because the university gives you the position and the space to say them. So they don't make a lot of money, but their life and work are still quite comfortable, and their role is to dare to speak out. Of course, there are still some people like this in our universities, for instance, Beida still has a few weird old-timers. But emotionally speaking, I don't feel I'm an Oxford person. I'm still a Wenzhou person.

Wu Qi: You don't think of yourself as a Beida person either?

Xiang Biao: I don't have a lot of nostalgia for Beida. I only went back once after I graduated, because I lost my diploma and had to get it replaced. We all get the Beida alumni newsletter, but after I took a look at I had even less urge to go back to campus. The first half is full of pretentious essays on things like "moonlight on Weiming Lake*,"

and the second half lists people who got rich or became big-name offi-cials. Neither one of these does much for me, and now when I think of Weiming Lake, I think of some vice-head of a province strolling around the lake, recharging his batteries and cooling his heels, none of which interests me in the slightest. I really don't think of myself as a Beida person, but maybe this will change when I hit 60 and get nostalgic for my youth. I am very grateful to Beida, and objectively speaking it was enormously important to me, but I don't identify with it emotionally.

I learned a lot at Oxford, and appreciated its democracy, its decen-tralization, the fact that the Vice-Chancellor of the university has little power, that each department does its own thing, and that everyone does their own thing…There is one more thing that is controversial, which is that when I arrived, salaries at Oxford were like salaries in China in the 1970s and 1980s. Our wages went up with seniority, year by year, and differences between professors' salaries and other members of the university, such as gardeners, were slight. It was a communal system, emphasizing equality instead of difference. I like that. State-funded educa-tion and health care in Britain are the same. Doctors cannot make that much money, but there are still a lot of excellent doctors who want to work here because of their identification with the profession and their feeling that what they do makes a difference. Now things are changing, because there is a lot of pressure, and if wages don't go up, people will go to the United States. But the fact remains that, over the past eight centuries, the Oxford "commune" did a lot of work and produced important foundational thinking.

From my point of view, this high-level "commune" is a good thing. Otherwise, it's never-ending. When universities start handing out bonuses and cash it creates an unhealthy environment. Those that get the money always think they could have gotten more, while those who didn't get the money are of course unhappy. It works better if everyone is the same. My father never understood this, and always said that if things are equal then nobody will work. It's true that some people don't work, and don't publish. But universities, societies, and individual lives are all ecological systems, and everyone has different capacities. Some people are good teachers who don't do research. Some people cannot publish, but they are great to talk to, which is a rich resource for everyone. Without the pressure of competition, everyone's individual talents can be fully expressed.

It just occurred to me that Oxford did undergo a huge change, something that will surprise of a lot of Chinese people. Fifteen or twenty years ago, Oxford changed from being a teaching university to being a research university. For the preceding 800 years, Oxford was mainly a teaching institution, the dons felt that tutorials were their main duty, and research was extra, or an expression of interest, but not their primary focus. It is only in the past 20 years that getting grants and publishing have become increasingly important aspects of work. Many old faculty members object strongly to this, arguing that their primary duty is to train young minds. They ask how important it is to be smart and write lots of books as an individual. The key is in who you are training. Really remarkable people can change the course of human history by educating their students and writing two or three articles over the course of their career.

Wu Qi: If you feel a sense of distance to both Beida and Oxford based on your experiences there, why is your identification as a Wenzhou person stronger?

Xiang Biao: To tell the truth, this is also constructed, and did not occur naturally. The way I look at things, even today, is similar to how people who make cigarette lighters in Wenzhou look at things (of course if I was really running a factory, whether I would get along with the workers is an open question). I got along with the people in Zhejiang Village with no trouble at all, and while I was in Beijing I spent most of my time with them, so if I identify with anyone, it is with the group of people in Zhejiang Village. Most of them had a middle school education and are over 50 now, so they were a bit older than I was. If my family had problems, I would seek them out first. They are always asking me how much money I make, and when I tell them, they say, "Oh my God, that little? Why don't you come back to China?" They always worry that I'm too thin, and take me out to eat or give me fruit. They take me to buy clothes and my leather jacket was a gift from them. They are like my big brothers. I'm like the little brother who did pretty well, went off to university and came back, so big brother wants to do right by little brother, but he doesn't really understand what little brother does. It's that kind of relationship. They spend a lot of time playing mahjong, which I don't play. Actually, that's an obstacle, and if I played better mahjong, we'd be even closer. We usually go out to eat and talk about business or about mutual acquaintances, how the relationship between this person and that person is, who went bust, who is doing well, who made a fortune…For me, these kinds of talks are a way to continue my social research.

Wu Qi: Are these the kind of exchanges you are most comfortable with? This kind of social research masquerading as small talk?

Xiang Biao: Not completely. There are still ways in which we are not the same, so I can't completely relax, and I'm always sort of in interview mode. At the same time, they provide me with a lot of information, so it turns into a kind of chat.

I have an affinity for intellectual populism, like we see in the reforms in Russia in the 1860s. I don't really know where this affinity comes from, but perhaps as a child, I felt that I was always in the shadow of parental authority, so I developed a rebellious attitude toward any authority-holder. This is complicated. I am surely no revolutionary, because in many cases I am cowardly, and in this sense I am a typical petty-bourgeois populist.

Wu Qi: Ha, ha! You pinned a label on yourself.

Xiang Biao: It's true. In 1930s Shanghai I might have been like that, a sort of crazy petty-bourgeois populist, what was known as the left-wing youth, but in fact, I would not have been a revolutionary, because I look down on or even detest authority in general. But I don't have the feelings of the petty-bourgeoisie. Ever since I was young I have been unsentimental. I don't celebrate my birthday, don't have the habit of writing letters or cards or keeping small animals. It's a thoroughly material existence, focused on saving and not wasting…I still remember when I was in elementary school, one of my mother's colleagues came over, and said she was buying a birthday present for her son. This made a deep impression on me, and I felt like it was something only foreigners do. When I got to Britain, I discovered that the British are equally unsentimental, and they keep a stiff upper lip no matter what happens, without making a fuss. I'm not sure what all of this has to do with what we were talking about, but it in fact helped to mold part of my academic style because I am not too sensitive to individual feelings.

A Sense of Distance and Directness

Wu Qi: This came up in *Global "Body Shopping"* as well. When you were explaining the reasons behind Indian tech workers' migration abroad, you basically started from a political economy standpoint, and paid less attention to choices having to do with religion, culture, or individual feelings. In the preface to the new volume, you yourself admit that you perhaps overlooked emotional factors.

Xiang Biao: In fact, a woman friend of mine from Australia pointed this out, and said I wrote as if the tech workers were all like Dr. Spock in *Star Trek*, always calculating, without feelings. Last week I was reading the biography of the Oxford philosopher Alfred Jules Ayer (1910–1989), and the author wondered if Ayer perhaps had autism, because it seems he understood nothing about other people's feelings. Maybe I have a little of this. It is strange, and I still don't quite understand it. When I went to Oxford to study anthropology, I didn't get along that well with the other students, because most students of anthropology have romantic feelings about people from different cultures, and really want to understand those people's lives and feelings, but I don't share that feeling at all. I have no romanticism.

Wu Qi: Over the course of all your years of study, reading, writing, researching, and teaching, you never completely identified with a particular group, an academic school, or an ideology?

Xiang Biao: That's true in a sense. So how do I think, if I don't engage with theory? This takes us back to the subject of my gentry temperament

because what I always want to do is to observe and poke around, looking to see if there are any problems. The fact that I don't feel particularly attracted to any one theory is surely not because I am unusually independent, or that I decided that I was different after thoroughly examining the theory in question. I don't really know much about theory, and don't care that much; my mind just doesn't work that way. Of course, the ideal situation would be to be able to think like that, but also to link up with different schools of thought, to push theory ever further along.

Wu Qi: You talked before about your lack of mastery of the scholarly literature, and when we look at your writing, especially the preface I just mentioned or later pieces, you seem to be conscious of a certain distance from theory, in a way that scholars rarely talk about. How did this consciousness develop?

Xiang Biao: There may be two levels to this: spontaneity and self-reflection. Avoiding theoretical language means privileging direct description, describing things as they are rather than describing them through theory. I work this way because I have a spontaneous interest in directness, at least aesthetically. Looking from another angle there is nothing unique about this; ninety-five percent of people are like me and prefer directness, so the question is, why did other people later move away from directness? From my final years at Beida through my initial years at Oxford, this kind of directness did not seem to be a problem, and my Ph.D. dissertation was very direct too. After I finished my dissertation, it was maybe ten years ago that I felt that I needed to change and engage more with theory. After that, I became self-consciously direct, because I know now that I am incapable of doing anything different. Then I also became more appreciative of directness. To be direct there has to be substance. As I mentioned before, the pop music of the 1960s and 1970s was often direct, but with strong content, because without it, directness simply feels uncouth. So what John Lennon and Bob Dylan wrote was very direct, for instance, "Imagine there's no countries/It isn't hard to do/Nothing to kill or die for/And no religion too." These lyrics are really revolutionary and powerful. There are also examples like John Berger and Xu Bing.

I find Xu Bing's art interesting, and his explanations are even more interesting. He uses very direct language to explain the quite complicated thinking behind his art. His explanation of how he did "A Book from the Sky" left a deep impression on me. The work is philosophical, and the feeling you get is that of tectonic plates moving. In "A Book from the

Sky," the Chinese characters look entirely familiar, but when you look at them closely, you realize that you don't know them, and all of a sudden you feel a distance between yourself and writing, or between yourself and your cultural existence, but you can't put your finger on what the distance actually is. In fact, Xu Bing achieved this through a direct, simple life experience. When he was a boy, his mother worked in the Beida library, so he would look at books there all day, and he later got interested in binding and engraving. He engraved all of the characters for "A Book of the Sky," using a Song dynasty process. He says the basic idea of creating a lot of imaginary characters was sort of a joke, but to make the joke into an art form that made people think required taking it seriously, he had to engrave all the characters, one by one, with utmost seriousness. He spent an entire summer engraving the imaginary characters. And that's all he said. He did not add complicated theory. Why is it serious and not a joke? Because only after you've invested labor in something does the contrast between true and false, real and fake, familiar and unfamiliar became a serious question.

Another of his works, "Phoenix," consists of two enormous birds constructed out of things that had been discarded or abandoned at construction sites; he insisted that all of the materials be these. In his imagination, this was China: a rising phoenix, beautiful and majestic, but wounded inside, because, on the work sites, people had died, or were still waiting to be paid.

If you don't look closely, all you see are two birds, and it's not all that interesting. In terms of the form of the objects, he could have achieved the same visual effect with any other construction method. But the reason he could explain what he did in such simple, direct language was because behind the visible art is the content Xu Bin brings—his labor and his understanding of China.

John Berger is more classical, and his directness comes from his depth. The strength that you feel from his writings comes from the effort that he invests in seeing, and the earnest interest and concern he expresses, which is how he achieves his directness.

Wu Qi: When I started reading your books, I felt a strong sense of rebellion, a kind of rebellion against the mainstream theory. Maybe this comes from the same sort of effort that Berger invested in his projects.

Xiang Biao: This evolved over a long period of time. Do you mean that what I write is different from what other people write? Or that I am going against current discourse on purpose?

Wu Qi: I felt like you were completely aware that what you were doing was different.

Xiang Biao: Maybe so. But my rebellion was not a conscious expression of opposition to current discourse, but was motivated by a more general spirit of rebellion. This is a spirit of seeking self-awareness and developing one's own voice, which is something I emphasize in my courses, the idea that all of social science is about cultivating a sense of agency. Having a sense of agency does not mean thinking "I'm fantastic" or "I'm special," nothing like that. Instead, it has to do with being a person in the world, and your relationship with that world, what you see when you look at the world. Even if what you see is not necessarily right, you still need to be clear about your way of thinking.

Professors at Oxford were on strike last semester. When I was talking with the students about whether they should support the professors, I quoted something Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) said in an interview. She said that she thought it was problematic that German students had taken to the streets to protest the Vietnam War. Her point was that you need to think clearly about what your relationship to that war is. Why did the war provoke such a strong reaction in the United States? One important reason was that at the time, people were drafted into the army, which meant that a lot of middle-class kids went off to war, which got everyone all worked up. After the war, the liberal economist Milton Friedman (1912–2006) suggested making military service voluntary instead of mandatory, a way of solving employment problems. At first, this looked like a simple technical adjustment, but it wound up having a huge impact on world politics. In a volunteer army, the soldier is paid wages. It is like a militia, and this kind of army cannot be a revolutionary force. When the draft was in place, soldiers were citizens first, and then warriors, and were in a position to discuss the idea of the war, a problem that went away when the army became voluntary. What Arendt meant was that, prior to this change, young Americans were protesting because they might have to go to war the next day, which made them think about the war and about protecting their own lives. What did this have to do with young people in Germany? I feel like this was a gutsy question to ask. Even if their opposition to the war was sincere, what material interest was in play in the case of the German youth? Only if you can give a clear answer to this question will your conduct be meaningful. The same logic applies to research, in that it is important that you be clear on your relationship with the world. So I told the students that

they could not support the strike simply because they agreed with the professors. They first needed to be clear on their own relationship with the professors and to the principles supported by the professors.

As for how to make a method out of "directness," it means: first, there must be content; second, there must be a certain punch or impact; and third, you have to write straightforwardly. So first, you need a rich accumulation of things to say about a subject; it won't do to make superficial, general statements. In your understanding, you need to explain how your subject matter is constituted from the inside out. In class, I make a distinction between "explaining" and "explaining away." "Explaining away" is self-contained; the goal is to settle something once and for all. A classic example might be the "push–pull theory" in studies of population movement or the relation of supply and demand in economics: there's supply and there's demand, so things happen. This doesn't explain things, but rather explains them away. A true explanation asks where does the demand really come from? It's the same for supply—where do you get the resources? You have to look inside to see how things happen and where the conflicts are. Once you capture the inner dynamics of things, your writing will have more punch. John Berger has a book called *King: A Street Story*, which is about homeless people who have a dog named King, and Berger writes about the world of these homeless people through the eyes of the dog. There is a kind of mutual dependency between the people and the dog, a kind of tenderness and love. It's sad, but the homeless are not depicted as completely helpless victims, but rather as people who build their own world, of which the dog is a part. This made me understand things differently. It is very direct, because Berger starts with the most obvious experiences of the homeless men and uses no theory at all, but the result has a powerful impact.

Third, you let your thoughts flow from the inside out, and vividly describe your feelings of discovery. Straightforward writing cannot be just a style of writing. Medical instructions are straightforward too, but they don't have the same impact. So, you have to convey to the reader what you felt as you worked through things.

Anthropologists and Their World

Wu Qi: The three levels of "directness" you just mentioned—shouldn't they be the whole point of anthropology as a discipline? Shouldn't anthropology be in the business of getting deeply into a subject, discovering its inner workings, and working out an explanation? Also, in your essay "Responses and Reflections—How we Narrate the Present and Grasp History, With Further Thoughts about the Public Role of Anthropology," you mention anthropology's anxiety, which is that it seems to be mired in concerns about "empathy" and "understanding." Why are we still talking about this today? Why is anthropology still "anxious?" Is everybody staying on the outside? Is no one directly confronting the question?

Xiang Biao: The dilemma of anthropology is fairly easy to explain, but the question you raise is bigger: why is directness still important in all academic discourse, for instance in literature? Here I want to mention specifically non-fiction writing. For me, this style of writing can be critical. I came of age in the 1980s reading famous works of reportage, which were fairly elitist judgments of history. Today's non-fiction of course is not standing in judgment of history but is instead focused on the writer's anxieties and dilemmas. I feel like the directness of this is valuable. Sometime in the future, we should bring people together from the fields of literature, media studies, anthropology, and the world of NGOs to develop this style further.

Anthropology's problem is relatively easy to explain because its starting point as a discipline is colonialism. Westerners wanted to explain other

cultures, and later on, anthropology gave birth to sociology. Human society had existed for a long time, so why did we suddenly start wondering about the structure of society a little more than a century ago? Because we had always governed ourselves through religion or customs and habits, and never focused on our own social life as an object of study. Objectifying oneself is not a natural thing to do, and the stimulus for it came from colonialism, and then from anthropology. So one of the earliest sociology textbooks, published in 1881, was written by Charles Letourneau and was called *Sociology: Based Upon Ethnography*. It discussed societies from around the world, a vision that allowed them to discover differences between the West and the rest, after which they started explaining where the modern West came from. This eventually gave rise to the "tradition and modernity" framework.

After WWII, scholars started to think that this wasn't right, and anthropology then became a tool for self-reflection and criticism of Western civilization. At the outset, there was the idea of "noble savages," the argument that savages were loftier than we are, as they had not been sullied by industrial civilization, a romantic Western way of thinking. In the 1960s, this way of thinking came to be politicized, and the argument was that capitalism is wrong, and the "savages" are closer to nature and humanity. This way of thinking is still alive and kicking today. So in the West, the main concern in anthropology is an academic concern, namely whether Western scholars truly can go and describe other cultures. What does "understanding" mean after all? Anthropology merged with psychology and philosophy, still seeking to explain how to understand other people and other cultures, while at the same time it reflected on Western culture. Anthropology thus became very reflexive and very refined.

But this depth and detail were not the same thing as the "penetration" I have been talking about, because the starting point for penetration is not to understand what people like and dislike, love and hate, but instead to get into a question and its internal contradictions and the emphasis is much more on how things are related. For example, for the migrant workers who were recently "cleaned out" of Beijing, how do they feel about their expulsion and about their relationship with Chinese society or their relationships with other urban residents? Other sources of knowledge can enrich your understanding, for example, their feelings about time, or their feelings about being cold in the dead of night, but understanding these feelings in and of themselves is not the goal. So my feeling

is that anthropology's original apolitical character is in fact related to what later came to be its overly political character, the fact that it argues that everything is about power relationships, including anthropological practice itself, which meant that it could never get a clear focus on the object of its study. In fact, politics is a fairly simple thing, which basically consists of dividing up various interests among various groups, even if how this happens, in reality, is of course always complicated. But if you don't focus on people's positions and the process of distribution, and only look at relations of power diffused in everyday life, these are everywhere, which means that there is no way to get a clear fix on things, and anthropology winds up being not direct enough.

Wu Qi: When you meet anthropologists from China or from around the world, do you have a sense of community?

Xiang Biao: Not much.

Wu Qi: But in your writings in recent years, like your work on Hong Kong, on sociologists in the sent-down youth period, "suspension,"*[1] "work holes,"*[2] etc., including your media interviews, you have been making suggestions to that community, which gives the impression that you are calling for some sort of action, calling for a certain intellectual community?

Xiang Biao: In fact, I'm hoping to convey those suggestions to people in general, and if that doesn't work, then I'll aim for young students first. That is my goal. As for my colleagues, since I am not too familiar with what they are doing, I have a hard time getting a dialogue going. There is a problem here. If academic work is solely a dialogue between

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[1] Translator's note: "'Suspension' is the translation of the Chinese term *xuanfu*, which has been widely used in public discussions in China since the mid-2010s. Suspension indicates a state of being in which people move frequently, conduct intensive labor, and pause routine life—in order to benefit fast and then quickly escape. People keep moving, with no end in sight, instead of changing their current conditions, of which they disapprove. As a result, frantic entrepreneurial energy coexists with political resignation." See Xiang Biao, "Suspension: Seeking Agency for Change in the Hypermobile World," *Pacific Affairs*: Volume 94, No. 2 June 2021, p. 233.

[2] Translator's note: "Work holes" describes a situation in which people work hard at jobs that they do not enjoy. They treat work as a hole: jump in, work intensively in order to save enough therefore to jump out of the hole as quickly as possible. See Xiang Biao. 2021. "Pocketed Proletarianization: Why There Is No Labor Politics in the 'World's Factory.'" In *Precarity and Belonging: Labor, Migration, and Non-citizenship*, eds. Catherine Ramirez, Sylvanna Falcon, Juan Poblete, Steven McKay, Felicity Amaya Schaeffer. Rutgers University Press: 161–175.

colleagues, then you are writing solely for me to comment on you. This is how a friend of mine describes the dilemma of Western anthropology: an anthropologist says something so that his colleague will have something to say back. If I had to choose between going to a conference and going to a village to do fieldwork, I would certainly get more out of going to the village.

Wu Qi: Have you ever wondered why it is that you don't feel a sense of community with other scholars despite being a part of that system?

Xiang Biao: This is going to sound a little arrogant, but I feel like their division of labor is too specialized, because my strong point is not in specialization or in refining an idea. In terms of technique, I don't have that ability. My feeling is that depth in social sciences is not something that you can grind out, but the depth comes from immersing yourself in the facts so that you understand the issue well, you grasp it firmly, you interrogate it from every angle. Of course, your logic has to be tight, and your data has to be solid—that's when things get deep. But you don't achieve true depth through that kind of linear accumulation of theories in words.

Wu Qi: Have you ever been criticized by a colleague for this?

Xiang Biao: No, because I have never been a threat to anyone. I'm not worth criticism, and I'm not being modest, that is just the fact of the matter. People should go do something else, or criticize someone who is more important.

Wu Qi: My impression is that you welcome criticism, and in the essay we already mentioned, "Responses and Reflections," you were excited to have someone criticize you on a specific point.

Xiang Biao: That's right, it had to do with my response. That criticism was excellent, it was from a student who said that in terms of style, my essay was uneven—the first part and the second part were different in their angle of analysis and in writing style—because I was looking at facts from a macro-historical perspective instead of starting with the facts themselves, which made my position less firm and consistent. I completely agree. There was another person doing cultural studies at Lingnan University, and his criticism was that my essay was "blindly falling into the mythology of the Party-State," and he had a point, too. These were both very specific. Since I think I'm not worthy of criticism, when I get some it's great, it's a kind of praise.

Wu Qi: I have also noticed that when young people ask naïve or immature questions, you still answer them. Is this from a sense of responsibility, or is it something else?

Xiang Biao: With young people, it is not at all a sense of responsibility, but rather that I am curious. I don't find their questions naïve at all. We all have different life experiences, family backgrounds, genders, and ages, which means that we naturally look at things differently. One student wrote me a letter saying that I was always saying "you're right" when responding to a question, which none of her friends ever said. This was really interesting. She was quite young and sensitive to the smallest detail. I had never noticed that I said that all the time. This may be because academics have the habit of discussing on the basis of affirmations, so in conferences we are always saying "you're right" whether or not the person is actually right. So even that observation was stimulating.

Non-Fiction Writing

Wu Qi: You mentioned non-fiction writing before, as well as your interest in reading reportage literature when you were young. The directness and the willingness to discuss issues found in that type of writing had an important impact on you, and a fairly positive one. And it is true that recently, young people have become interested in non-fiction writing, a lot of it online, as in the case of Fan Yusu, whom we have already mentioned. But I have noticed some changes in this recent wave of writing, even if the directness is still there. It may be nothing more than changes in style, or in language, a desire to express themselves in more modern terms, but the richness, the punch of it is slipping away. There is a tendency to tell one person's story completely from their perspective, without explaining why they chose that story, which is worth talking about. Or they might talk about some collective event, and weave together eight or ten distinct pieces of information, the way journalists do, presenting everything as objective facts that cannot be disputed. You mentioned a kind of gravity when you talked about the gentry's concern for the future, for ethical judgments, but this is completely absent in today's non-fiction writing, and in fact, largely absent from much of contemporary society.

Xiang Biao: This is interesting, and I would like to add a bit from my perspective. If you include your own vision in writing, it will add a sense of gravity, but even more importantly, it will give the text a soul, so that it is no longer a mechanical exercise, but something informed by

vision and soul. Vision and soul will also help to determine what weight to give to various aspects of your work. In the example you just mentioned, it would be very difficult to write out the perspectives of eight people, and it would be even more difficult to put them in one text. How about giving it a soul? One way of doing this is to consciously explain the positions of these eight people; the eight individuals represent eight positions. A certain position is closer to the heart of the matter, another is more peripheral, and so on. We should give them different weighted values. The weighting is not a matter of a theoretical judgment but is instead an empirical assessment—it's descriptive. Social science is primarily about description. Describing things clearly is the greatest contribution. Because what the world needs you to do is to provide clear descriptions of complex things.

We should also add technique to the mix because it really matters—things are done through techniques. These days people talk about the materiality of knowledge, saying that craftsmanship is interesting. This is good. We should emphasize craftsmanship, emphasize concrete, material, and clear observations of our surroundings. We should not jump into lofty abstraction too quickly.

Wu Qi: I wonder if you could be a bit more specific about the idea of weighted value, or maybe give an example to illustrate it? Because an issue has many aspects, there is judgment involved in deciding which aspect is most important. So how do you decide when you are assigning weighted values?

Xiang Biao: Of course, this will be influenced by the author's value judgments, but for me, the ideal situation is to use empirical observation. Take the example of peasants who deposit complaint petitions.[1] Do they do this because they are angry that village land has been occupied, or are they thinking that if they make some noise, the problem will be resolved quickly, or maybe they know that once they file the petition the county will give them some money, or is it a way to bargain over the amount of money? It may be that there are several factors, but we will use empirical observation to assign different weights, and figure out if finally, it is a moral political action or a utilitarian calculation. Another example. The Beijing government is now (2018) closing down wholesale markets in Zhejiang Village, and the process of how the government will

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[1] Translator's note: Filing complaint petitions (*shangfang**) is one of the few ways to legally express grievances, especially in rural China.

compensate individual stall-owners in the markets is extremely complex. We won't be able to give a clear account unless we know how to weigh the different aspects of the process. Local governments received money from the central authorities to compensate those merchants whose stalls would be removed. Merchant representatives negotiated with the local government as they suspected that the local government did not pass on the compensations from the center in its entirety. This was meant to be a grassroots, democratic process. But what happened was that once someone was elected as a representative, they would tell the government that for a certain amount of money, they would help keep other merchants from making trouble. And when the merchants found out about this, they tried to prevent the representative from playing this kind of trick. How do you understand this representative? Was he always like this? Or did he become this way in the course of negotiations, or was somebody putting pressure on him? When I talk about weighted variables, I mean that you have to pay attention to the complexity, and then separate the principal from the secondary contradictions. You don't deduce this from a set of principles, but instead from paying attention to these concrete details. You basically develop this ability through experience, gradually learning how to do it.

Wu Qi: A little while ago you said that the problem with anthropology is easy to explain, but if we consider knowledge production in general, problems are still there. For example, journalists usually talk about interview techniques and the spatial arrangement of their texts, just like professors talk about how to publish their papers and measure their impact. It's a matter of techniques and practice. However, if our discussions stay at this level, we are a long way away from the original purpose of these professions. We may wind up with technically skilled journalists or scholars, but what will they have discovered? What problems will they have solved? It seems to me that there are fewer discussions within these occupations about ideas and values, and that the general public is not interested in those technical discussions.

Xiang Biao: This finally has a lot to do with what you are concerned with. But what caused the loss of concern may be the lack of robust means to specify what the concern is. The question is how to produce concrete outputs driven by concerns, for which technical issues are important—the two aren't mutually exclusive. I feel like one of the negative inheritances of the 1980s was the people's concerns were blown out of proportion, while they did not take methodology seriously. Then the concerns became

empty. Gentry naturally know how to solve this problem, because their interests and their concerns are focused on something close at hand.

Sometimes you have to let go when you specify your concerns. I think you should combine your concerns with a sense of curiosity, and with a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguities. You cannot allow yourself to think that anything with contradictions or ambiguities is less good, because life is full of them, so you need to be excited about ambiguities. Large concerns of course are part of lofty ideals, but in practice, you often have to put ideals aside and explore the reasons for the existence of what is not ideal. You must pursue your concerns step by step, so I always stress operationalization. The online news portal HK01 once interviewed me, and the title they gave the interview was "The Anthropologist who Makes Cigarette Lighters," because I'm from Wenzhou, which is known for making cigarette lighters. For people in Wenzhou, the most important thing is to produce something. The basic idea is that all of your theories and thinking should be connected to "making something." When you make something, you are limited by all kinds of material conditions, and our agency and freedom are limited. So what we can do is let the given material forces play a bigger role. For example, a group of Wenzhou peasants made money at the end of the 1970s by making meal tickets. They knew the college entrance exam was going to be restored, so they started making plastic meal tickets.[2] When they started, raw materials were a big challenge as they were expensive. They got leftover bits of plastic from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in Shanghai. The SOEs were simply throwing these away, but they were perfect for making meal tickets. All this could lead to deep theoretical analysis as this touches on the relations between SOEs and market exchange, between SOEs and rural industry, and the question of mixed property ownership, etc. But these theoretical meanings became visible only in the process of "doing." You won't be able to see these subtle, but at the same time quite important, facts if you stick to your concerns and do not make open-ended observations.

Wu Qi: If we extend this idea of "doing," does it mean something for anthropology? Or more broadly, for contemporary intellectuals and their attitude toward society, or for their work methods?

Xiang Biao: I think it should. One of the most important changes in China now, especially after the expansion of college enrollment in the late

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[2] Translator's note: Plastic meal tickets were used instead of cash in university dining halls.

1990s, is that with the increase in family investment in education, and the changes in information technology and social media, the distinction between intellectuals and non-intellectuals has become blurred among young people. The boundary between doing and thinking is almost gone. This is a really good thing, and we should break down the distinction as much as possible, because everyone is an intellectual.

In light of this, what should people like us do? Since other people don't have the time to organize information systematically, we should put information together to form a picture of reality. Another important thing is to seek out hope and capacity in what other people are doing. Social change after all is a social process, moved by social forces, and one of the few things intellectuals can do is to mobilize people. Mobilization means that the strength is with other people, and all you are doing is helping them to realize the strength that they have, which means bringing latent hope and capacity to the surface. In the language of the Communist Party, this is called "guiding" work. Its assumption is that the ability, the hope, and the future already exist in society, but you have to dig for them. This means that looking for contradictions and searching for capacity are one and the same thing. Seeing contradictions means understanding both sides of an issue, and the conflict between these two sides is what drives change.

For many thoughtful young people who are not professional intellectuals, their own doing is the subject of their thinking. They should think through their relation to society, which I summarized somewhere as "accepting fate without giving up."* Since Sartre, we have all understood that existence precedes essence, which means that your nature is not fixed, and your actions decide what kind of person you are. No one is born a woman; you become a woman through social processes. Looking at life this way is liberating. But the problem with the current situation is that everyone feels they are completely free to do anything. They want to get famous, have a family, make money, pursuing all of this through their freedom. They overlook an important question, which is "Who are you?" Everyone has their history, their family background, and their educational experience. The entire social order accords everyone a place, which is difficult to change, and you need to understand clearly who you are. "Accepting fate" means understanding who you are in terms of your history and your place in the social structure. Women are molded into becoming women by social processes before they know it, and it is no simple matter to reverse it. The social and historical forces that

are molding you are much stronger than any individual effort. A child from a poor family can become rich, but simply rejecting your fate as a poor person will not solve the problem, and in fact, we know that this kind of thinking leads to many psychological and social problems. So the key is to grasp clearly where you are in society, understanding why it is still so hard to be a woman or to be poor. Then, how should you be a woman? How should you be poor? How do you keep pushing back against the forces of society and history without throwing in the towel? China's LGBT community has set a good example. They know that their lives will not be easy, but they have embraced that life. They are not praying for their lives to change but instead continuing to fight and push back against the ways things are.

Academics Is Not a Vocation

Wu Qi: The opportunity to interview you in Oxford gave me a feeling for your work and life environment there, and the whole thing struck me as very routinized, clean, and a long way from any "center." No one bothers you, your college is right next to where you live, and in just a few steps you can be walking in the fields. This is completely different from conditions in China. What is your work life like in Oxford?

Xiang Biao: With a few colleagues, I run an M.A. program in migration studies, which is my "private plot."*[1] Oxford gives me a lot of space, and a three-year sabbatical, so for the last three years I was in Japan. If I did not have so much free time, I couldn't drop everything and rush off to Hong Kong to observe the Umbrella Movement in 2014, or think about ethnic relations in China. I am quite busy, but if I didn't have so much free time I wouldn't be able to fill it up as I do. My wife always says I have too much free time, because she has to get things done every day and does not have time to be "busy."

Oxford also likes to see research results, and they emphasize social impact. In China, scholars should adopt the concept of "social impact," which the government is also talking about, and move scholarship away from narrow technical or specialized work. One of the keys to increasing social impact is to pay close attention to emerging public concerns and

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[1] Translator's note: Under China's system of collectivized agricultural production, which has basically disappeared during reform and opening, peasants were allocated small "private plots" that they could cultivate as they wished.

redefine them in such a way as to change the way the public thinks, which can wind up creating a new campaign or a new action strategy. How do you come up with new definitions of public concerns? For this, you need to collect materials systematically and elaborate rigorous arguments.

Wu Qi: How do research and teaching work at Oxford? What courses do you give? Does teaching inform your research in any way?

Xiang Biao: I basically give two courses, one of which is called "Keywords," in which we analyze ideas like "population." All of us who work on migration use the term "population," but "populations" don't really exist in the world. A person is just a person, so where does the aggregate concept come from? "Population" also has its own structuring qualities, such as the death rate, the birth rate, etc. In addition, there are direct connections with political science, and it also relates to the development of statistics and mathematics, which together give you a particular image of a society. Now populations are grouped by countries and linked to national political regimes. We also discuss concepts such as "market," "people," and "security." These days China often talks about national security, which they did not talk so much about in the past, and needs to be explained. In today's Europe, illegal immigration is viewed as a security question, which we need to examine too.

Second, I give an optional course on the question of nation-states and mobility. We tend to think that mobility is opposed to the power structure or an established system, but mobility is an important foundation for the establishment of certain power systems. For example, in the Catholic church, the movement of bishops to different dioceses is rather important. The same is true of the mobility of colonial officials during the era of the British empire. In Chinese history, there was the abolition of native rule and its replacement by regular administration,[2] in which land that was originally self-administered by minority ethnic groups came under the control of Chinese officials sent by the center.

It is not easy to combine my classroom teaching with my own research and public engagement. One reason is that our students, despite their diversity, are still basically interested in Europe and America, and very few

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[2] Translator's note: This policy, known as *gaitu guiliu** in Chinese, was directed at various minority groups, chiefly in Southwest China, who had previously enjoyed a kind of self-rule but were incorporated into the mainstream administrative structure during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

of them work in China. So discussions I can have here are not as interesting as discussions in Singapore. Our anthropology department is also quite scholarly. I don't buy what Weber said, that contemporary society has become disenchanted and that scholarship must be a vocation. To my mind, scholarship is not a vocation, but rather a tool, my way to enter society and the world.

Wu Qi: You said that you had started to work bilingually. How does that work? When did you start?

Xiang Biao: I just started doing this in the past couple of years. If I'm using an idea that was developed first in Chinese, I will explain it in English. In the process of explaining it, I always discover that some things were left out and that there is a lot that needs to be explained. Sometimes I use an ambiguous term to refer to something rather specific, which doesn't always work. At the same time, if I use a concept that was first developed in English, when I explain it in Chinese, I will also notice a lot of problems. For example, if I am talking about something which to me seemed quite creative, sometimes when I explain it in Chinese there is nothing to it, nothing new—it lacks sharpness or "incisiveness." Thus Chinese can serve as a test to see how much new meaning is actually included in the content, while English serves to test the process of argumentation, and whether or not the meaning is clear enough. If things work in both directions, then I'm pretty confident.

When you try and fail to explain things to a foreign student, this means that you don't understand them well enough. You can describe things in two ways. One is to oversimplify, to reduce it to something that is already understood, which means giving it a definition, putting it in a box, and making everything clear. The other way is to explain the issue's internal complexity, which is endless. People may get increasingly lost because the details spin out endlessly, and the box itself is turned upside down on the table. So you have to concentrate on the main points. You have to tell a story, and focus only on the big picture, and only by knowing the underlying details can you convey the complexity. Once you've got a handle on the basic question, the details come into focus.

There is a simple word in English: "about." When I counsel my students I tell them that they have to clearly identify what their research is about. You can work "on" peasants or "on" university students, but "about" has to do with your *problématique*, so it can be about labor relations, or the power relations in a spatial arrangement, or about gender relations, you have to make this clear. If you don't, people will not

understand where you are going. My bilingual method of working is a way to get the "about" right, through translation. You can also clarify your "about" by talking to friends, forcing each other to specify what the stories are about. Here we have three kinds of translations: between languages, among friends or colleagues, and between data and arguments. Without these translations, or if the translations are too flat or too sloppy, then the "about" won't emerge, and the same is true for everyday observation.

Nationalism and Populism

Wu Qi: We didn't talk much last time about your life in Singapore or Hong Kong. Maybe we can start with this. What brought you to Singapore?

Xiang Biao: In 2003, when I had almost finished my doctorate, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) had a project on Chinese migration to Europe and was looking to hire someone. That project was related to Northeast China because the European Union had noticed that people from this region were immigrating to Europe. "Illegal immigration" sounds like it is something that has been with us forever, but in terms of a policy concept it is relatively recent, and only appeared in the 1990s, like "asylum seeker." These concepts did not exist during the Cold War; then, refugees were just refugees, most of which came from Communist countries. Most of the cases involved intellectuals, and the West offered them excellent conditions. After the end of the Cold War, people from formerly Communist countries could leave when they wanted to, and at the same time there were a great many small-scale ethnic conflicts in Africa and elsewhere, which produced genuine refugees. They were different from the political cases that had been considered refugees in the Cold War, and there were so many of them that the West could not treat them in the same way, so they created the new term "asylum seeker." This is a strange term in that it does not say that you are a refugee, and does not say that you aren't, only that you are in the process of being looked into.

Human trafficking is also a political concept that emerged after the Cold War, in the early 1990s. The emergence of this concept was largely the product of the moral panic provoked by the arrival of sex workers who came to Western Europe from Eastern Europe. At first, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western Europe thought that there would be countless people coming from East, which frightened them, and they wanted to prevent it. Second, the general public in Western Europe has deep-rooted moral objections to the sex industry, but cannot denounce it, because feminism in Western Europe is strong, and feminists believe that the sex industry is a kind of "sex work" that deserves respect and protection, not prohibition and moral opprobrium. So policy turned the sex industry problem into a human trafficking problem. The sense of the policy was that if people came from Eastern Europe to Western Europe to engage in sex work, it could not be voluntary, because no woman would willingly engage in sex work, so they must have been trafficked. This is how the logic worked, and it can be seen as a denial of women's autonomy. Human trafficking is also closely linked to illegal immigration, and fears of human trafficking are largely similar to fears of illegal immigration, because it is hard to criminalize illegal immigration. In terms of European legal principles, illegal immigration is not a crime, and is a simple matter of crossing national borders without permission, but if you turn it into a case of human trafficking, then it becomes criminal, and you can attack the problem. The concept of human trafficking is also part of the hollowing out of ideology that followed the end of the Cold War, where a sort of empty humanitarianism has come to dominate the discourse, in the world and in China.

In this environment, the European Union asked the IOM to launch a project on Chinese immigration to Europe, and luckily for me my dissertation was about finished, so I went to Geneva. During the day I worked as a member of the research team, and at night I wrote my dissertation. When I started, China still had only observer status on the IOM; China became a member in 2016. In 2017, the IOM formally became a part of the United Nations. So migration is a big issue internationally. But the perspective from which migration is defined as a problem is clear—a problem that requires intervention, that requires programs to respond, that requires assistance. It is clearly defined from the perspective of the rich countries, even though they talked about it in the language of human rights.

I worked there for more than six months, dealing with all sorts of highly formal language; most people who work in international immigration organizations have never met an immigrant—all the work is paperwork. But I learned something from this, which is that people who understand the situation clearly cannot write it up in a formal manner, and the categories used by the international organizations are often labels, which do not explain things clearly.

At the time we were setting up our migration research center at Oxford, and I was one of the applicants. The Center was approved, but there would be no money for a year, so when I got back from Geneva, I had no salary, even if there was a job eventually waiting for me. To fill the time, I did a post-doc at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore. Singapore's impact on my life was considerable. That's where I met my wife, who was also at Asia Research Institute. When I was there, the head of the Institute was Anthony Reid (b. 1939), a famous historian of Southeast Asia, who does Braudel-like *long durée* studies of economic and social history. His goal is to break through the national frameworks we use today. He argues that many transnational links have existed for a long time and might be more important than nation-states. For someone like me who came out of Beida, I thought this was beside the point since the nation-state remains the most important category today and you have to confront that. Later on, I slowly understood that Reid's vision was important; the idea is not to deny the importance of the contemporary nation-state, but if you understand the history of the nation-state, then you can relativize it, you can achieve a sense of distance, and a gentry vision can reemerge. The reason that the gentry study history, or that Western intellectuals study ancient history, Greece and Rome, is not because they want to stitch together a simple self-narrative—although it can be used that way, and nationalism always wants to construct a continuous, unilinear narrative—but because another sense of time, an understanding of the *longue durée*, can give you a firmer grasp on today's politics, as well as a healthy sense of distance.

After I finished a year-long post-doc at Singapore, I stayed on as a visiting scholar, and even after returning to Oxford, I spent more time in Singapore. Later on, Prasenjit Duara became head of the Institute, and the power of his imagination, as well as his insights on important issues of the moment, had a huge impact on me. He held a lot of international symposiums in Singapore, hoping to put the university on the world's intellectual map, and these events really opened my eyes. But what I found

most remarkable about Singapore was not the people like Duara and Anthony Reid, but the group of dedicated people behind them. You've probably never heard of them, most of them are women, and they may not spout grand ideas, but they put their heads down and get to work, with an attitude of thorough professionalism. They work in teams, they are open-minded, and they are quite selfless. There are a lot of people like this in Singapore. Everybody talks about how great Lee Kuan Yew was, and of course, he was important, but getting things done requires not only a great plan but also the step by step implementation. If you don't do it today, if you don't make today's mistake today, you'll never know how much you will get done tomorrow, so the only solution is to do it. To me, this is the Singapore spirit. Oxford is not like this, because Oxford can rest on its laurels, but for many Asian countries that are coming from behind, Singapore is worth studying.

I'm against ideas of creativity or genius. Everything comes from labor and effort. Our textbook story about Da Vinci drawing eggs endlessly[1] when he was a kid tells us something that is true. Art doesn't rely completely on imagination. Art is very concrete, just like the feeling of the ray of sunlight that touched you this morning. If you want to get a good hold on that feeling, you have to learn to make it, by carving, or painting, getting the color right. Beida is a bit representative of the opposite, in that students there, talk big but are not particularly good at getting things done. When I was a student there we all had memorized the sentence "[Beida] is holy ground…" A friend of mine studying political science said that if you call where you are standing "holy ground" you'll turn everyone else off. China is huge, what is everyone outside of Beida going to think? What kind of attitude was this teaching Beida students? I thought he was right. Big talk is kind of scary, as if some kind of feeling got you all worked up, but once it blows over there is nothing left.

Wu Qi: Singapore doesn't have this kind of ecology?

Xiang Biao: No. At present, they lack that bit, but their infrastructures and work methods are excellent. What they can do, they do very well, but as for incorporating different ideas to achieve a huge breakthrough, they are not there yet.

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[1] Translator's note: It is commonly believed in China that when Da Vinci started to learn to draw, his master made him draw eggs for three years so that he could achieve complete mastery. The detail is not found in Walter Isaacson's biography of the artist.

Wu Qi: You just talked about the importance of a long-term view of history, which reminded me of when you talked before about your debate with the head of a College at Oxford, when you argued that a short-term view of history can sometimes reveal more layers of an issue, and your preference at the time for short-term views of history in the context of your own research. I wonder if there is a contradiction here?

Xiang Biao: At the time, what I said was that a long-term view of history was like a long novel, which meant that you could take a long period of time to explain yourself, while as an anthropologist, I preferred a poem or a play, which has to explain things clearly within tight limits. Now I kind of regret saying that; I was just ignorant and hadn't grasped the importance of history. In fact, a good play needs a good feeling for history to know what to include and what to leave out.

When I talked about a long-term view of history during our conversation just now, it was in the context of nationalism and contemporary politics, so it was a different question. A long view of history can serve two purposes: one is to build continuities, the longer the better, which makes everything look more consistent, and identifies the point of departure all the more clearly. Nationalism insists on having a single starting point, from which all else flows. A typical example of this is how we used to talk about how the geologist Li Siguang* (J. S. Lee, 1889–1971) discovered oil, as if this ancient thing had been made just for the People's Republic of China. This is a typically nationalistic explanation. The other use flips this on its head, insisting that because there has been so much history, you can see the series of ebbs and flows that make up the world, the different social arrangements, public projects, fights over power, divvying up of interests, etc., which tells us that the current situation, in this much longer context, is a short and temporary situation. Of course, we still have to engage seriously with the world in which nation-states will almost certainly outlive all of us, it's just that in the process of doing so, we should not essentialize the nation, to use an academic word. When you essentialize something you say that it has always been like this and that it should continue to be like this. When you de-essentialize something, you say, yes, things are like this, but this is relative, or, in Marxist terms, this is historical. This means that everything has its history, its origin, its development, its decline, and the concrete expression of concrete factors.

I am more sympathetic to nationalism than many other intellectuals. Indian scholars have a clear understanding of this. They say that the British aristocracy had no sense of nationalism, and when Indians opposed

colonialism by promoting nationalism, the British aristocracy saw them as provincial, and lacking a broad perspective, and claimed that only they, the British, were looking at all of humanity from a global perspective. We should emulate this Indian sensitivity. First, there is no true "all of humanity," and claims made in the name of humanity always reflect a particular perspective. Second, if we follow someone else's "all of humanity," we are in fact betraying our own position in the world. If we want to respect our history of being colonized and oppressed, we must rely on nationalism to counter that simplistic, abstract narrative. Thus I feel that nationalism remains quite important today, and I see it as a tool of struggle. But if you take nationalism as an essentialized, eternal expression of the Chinese people's relationship with the world, then this makes no sense, because we know that nationalism only appeared in China in the late Qing period, and was the result of the struggle of many people.

These are the two uses of a long view of history. Do you want to dig a tunnel through a mountain, where you enter on one side and come out the other, or do you want to get out and see the bigger picture, a broader horizon?

Wu Qi: While we're talking about nationalism, perhaps we could make a conceptual distinction between nationalism and populism, especially since today more and more things seem to circulate between the two and it's easy to lump them together. I'm thinking of the patriotism of Chinese overseas students, of "fan culture" on the Chinese Internet, of the support for Trump and other populist leaders…How should we understand these? How do we find the more healthy and organic aspects of nationalism without descending into populism in our daily practice? Is there any room to maneuver here?

Xiang Biao: That's a great question. Maybe we should look at specific cases because it is hard to establish a standard for what is good and what isn't. European historians make a distinction between civic nationalism, found to the west of the Rhine, and ethnic nationalism found to the east of the Rhine. By "west of the Rhine" they mean the republics, of which France is representative, which have common political understandings to the effect that regardless of your skin color or your ethnicity, you are a citizen as long as you respect the country's political ideals and the constitution. "East of the Rhine" is Eastern Europe, where the key questions are "who is your father?" "What is your surname?" "What is your religion?" and "what color is your skin?" This is based on ethnicity, not on

political principles. Of course, I am oversimplifying it, but it illustrates that nationalism can take on different colorations.

When nationalist feelings are stirred up, you first need to realize that this is not necessarily a bad thing, and not necessarily a good thing. Everything depends on whether nationalism is the result of a reflection on the world situation and power relations, or instead a reflection on ethnic identity. I have problems with Chinese nationalism as an expression of ethnic identity, but from the perspective of resisting American hegemony, it is not unreasonable. In fact, the question is complicated. I once wrote that in China's socialist revolution, nationalism and internationalism were tied together, because otherwise there would have been no socialism, which is international. In the eyes of the Chinese government, Mao Zedong's greatest contribution was not building the new China, but was instead "being a great Marxist," and raising socialism to new heights, which was a contribution to the world. Now, however, Mao is seen as a nationalist. There were a lot of nationalists in China, including Zhang Taiyan*[2] (1869–1936) and Sun Yat-sen*, who started out opposing the Manchus and then embraced the Republic. They were looking to define their place in the world, and in this process where to draw the lines around a particular nation kept changing because "nation" is not a natural category. Today, many expressions of nationalism essentialize the nation, ignoring how peoples and nations evolved in history. A way out is to pay more attention to details. If you're unhappy about something and want to explain it away through nationalism, then maybe we should first have a chat about why you are unhappy, and see whether nationalism is really the solution to your problem.

[2] Translator's note: Zhang Taiyan was an important philosopher and politician in late Qing and early Republican China.

Singapore Enlightenment

Wu Qi: At Oxford, you sustain yourself through teaching, research, and chatting with friends. What work were you doing in Singapore?

Xiang Biao: Conferences, lots of academic activities. That year in Singapore was one of the happiest in my life. There were no burdens on me because no one knew who I was. I had finished my dissertation and was getting ready to publish it. At the same time, I learned a lot of new things about Southeast Asia. Material conditions in Singapore are excellent. The Asia Research Institute invited a lot of famous visiting scholars. Visiting scholars are always friendly, probably because they are free from routines at home and as guests, there are no fights over who gets what, and they can engage in pure intellectual exchange. Especially when Prasenjit Duara was there, many of the discussions were really interesting. We'd go swimming or go out to eat, and then start a discussion. For me, it was almost a feeling of enlightenment, as if all of a sudden I'd worked through my scholarly and political problems. Without my Singapore experience, I probably could not have written essays like "The World, Scholarship, and the Self." I started to get a better understanding of the meaning of scholarship as a human practice; for example, people like Vani helped me to understand that scholarship is like movies, poetry, art, or folk songs, in that they are all means by which humanity expresses itself. It's kind of embarrassing that it took me so long to understand that scholarship is a kind of praxis. My enlightenment did not occur until I was 30, and I had never understood that at Oxford. I had always

seen scholarship as a vocation, and never thought about why we do it, had never considered that scholarship is like a fable or a song.

Wu Qi: It's surprising to hear you talk about an enlightenment, because from Beida to Oxford, you had access to the best education in the world, in an age of enlightenment and openness, but you did not have that experience until after graduating, and in a relatively small community in Singapore.

Xiang Biao: We already talked about centers and margins. By the same token, big has its drawbacks, and sometimes you see more things because you are in a small place. This may sound strange because isn't there more to discover in big places? It's true. China is big and complicated, but one of China's central concerns is to eliminate this complexity, to simplify it. But in a small place like Singapore, politics of course has to be unified, but in cultural terms, you have to live and let live.

Singapore cannot have a definitive identity, because its identity is defined by other people, and it has to constantly keep its eye on the world context and the regional context so that Singapore positions itself as a brokerage state. Lee Kuan Yew, the leader of such a small country (Singapore is smaller than Wenzhou—Wenzhou has a population of more than nine million, while Singapore's is five million), had a considerable role to play and a reputation on the international stage and was quite close to other world leaders at the time. After Lee's wife died, Henry Kissinger called him every week. Lee Kuan Yew had a clear vision of what Singapore is, and he knew that no one would pay attention to such a small country, which meant that Singapore had to pay attention to the larger world, starting with the world around it: its relations with Malaysia and Indonesia, and then as part of East Asia. It had to consider Britain's perspective, America's perspective, what relations Singapore should develop with mainland China and Taiwan, etc. In doing so, Singapore constantly plays the role of mediator. Singapore is small but smart and is constantly observing other people, and imbedding itself in different contexts in different ways because they always worry they will be abandoned by others. By way of contrast, big countries always start with themselves, define the rest of the world according to their own vision, opposing this and proclaiming that, getting less smart in the process.

It's a good question: why I came to understand "enlightenment" in a small place. I think it was because it freed me from the way I used to think, which was through sort of self-serving symbols and formulas. Vani poked fun at me, because she saw through me right away, probably

because she had already seen a lot of people like me. She said that I am the type of scholar who sort of drowns in their nations' self-narrative: China is like this, China is like that. They are always eager to discuss big issues and put the nation before everything else without understanding the facts of the matter. Singapore can't do that. Its history is relatively short, and does not have a common language or a common culture; it is a country that "probably should not have existed." Even today, the government keeps reminding its citizens that "our very existence goes against the natural laws of history," so they have to work hard to stay ahead of history. They can never take anything for granted.

For a lot of ordinary people in Singapore, the government is always doing this and that, which wears everybody out, but Singapore has come to a thorough understanding of what it means to be "marginal," and they have capitalized on their marginality rather than cursing it. The whole region of Southeast Asia is fascinating. You've got these small, relatively weak countries, but people live quite well, so who says there's no life outside of world centers?

The Importance of Community

Wu Qi: What was your daily life like in Singapore?

Xiang Biao: Edward Said once said something quite interesting, which was that while he was against war, and opposed American military interventions in the Middle East, he really liked the military lifestyle, in which everything in your daily life is taken care of, you don't have to worry about what you are going to eat, and you can just concentrate on your work. Like in China's former work-unit system. Singapore was a bit like that when I was there. We lived in a dorm, and life and work were completely integrated. As a post-doc, I had no work pressure, no courses to give, and no administrative tasks, so it was great. All of our conferences were held at nice hotels, and the content of the papers was interesting, so everything went really smoothly. I think the best way to work is not to plan. If you feel like writing, you write, and if you don't feel like writing you let it go for a day or two. At the same time, there is an environment that supports you, so that even when you are feeling lazy there are ideas buzzing around, pulling you back in, so that everyone makes progress together. The Asia Research Institute at the time was just this kind of place, with strong intellectual leadership from people like Tony Reid and Prasenjit Duara, together with a bunch of very diligent Singapore scholars, so that everything was very well organized.

It takes work to build your own little world. It is not a matter of drinking and chatting all day, you need detailed activity plans, goals, and resources—without it getting to be too much. You need both stars

and supporting characters, but they have to feel like they are equal, and not in some kind of hierarchy. This is why I think universities should stress equality because there are some people who don't write particularly well but who do well in class, so there is no need to make everyone write essays. What you need is an ecology, a community. If it is too individualized it won't work.

Wu Qi: What are the other post-docs and visiting scholars who were there with you doing now?

Xiang Biao: I'm still in touch with them as friends. We plan on collaborating someday, on mobility-related social reproduction and the life economy. The idea behind this topic is that increasing numbers of people are mobile, but not as productive labor, which means working in factories or on plantations. These days people migrate to be domestic helpers, caregivers, students, or because they are sick or are retiring—or they go to have a child. The point of this kind of mobility is to maintain and continue life itself. We want to put all of these types of mobility together and see how the world is changing. Why is social reproduction becoming more important than material production? Is it telling us that there is a new global political economy emerging through migration? The importance of material production is declining while that of social reproduction is on the rise. How many cars, or shoes, a country produces will not earn it much money, and are worth less than good universities, good medical technology, and a good environment for retirement. "Social reproduction" has now become an important source of wealth accumulation and value. For all the talk of China's rise or Asia's rise, in the global context, if all they are chasing is material production, then they will never "rise" enough to catch up. Because while you are making solar panels, someone else is investing their time in "new lifestyles," and lifestyles are what make money.

Wu Qi: So your community held together even after everyone left Singapore and went home?

Xiang Biao: Yes, and it didn't take hard work, it was natural. The fact that we have common research interests was one strong link. The fact that we are friends is another. A third factor was our differences. We are all different. I like to dream big, while some of us do more detail-oriented work, so we complement one another. Then there are differences in the countries we work in. You need diversity within a group, and diversity needs to be broad. If everyone is working on the same China problem, then what's to talk about? This can make relationships tense, and produce

conflicts in terms of intellectual property or attribution. It's okay to work on different issues from different perspectives, and sometimes to differ on some fundamental issues. Some people may feel I'm too vague here, and that this can't work, but it's something to talk about, and the very "vagueness" might inspire someone, or spark their imagination. In China, the basic problem is that there is not enough diversity. Collaboration based on homogeneity can't take you very far.

Wu Qi: Maybe this kind of ideal academic community is hard to put together in any given country, and needs to cross a certain number of national, ethnic, or institutional boundaries, and to transcend specific relationships of work and interest before it can come together?

Xiang Biao: Absolutely, which is why the institutionalization of academic research always comes with limitations. To use a botanical metaphor, we need a lot of "rhizome"[1]-like networks, with which people can find their partners while working on their own things, giving life to their own academic thought. If everything is institutionalized, it becomes hierarchical, and then you're done for. A rhizome is a good image to work with, because it is horizontal, open, and intertwined—relations can develop in any direction and ultimately complement and nourish one another.

Wu Qi: You have yourself experienced several different styles and structures of academic organization in Singapore, Hong Kong, Beida, and Oxford. Could you make a comparison?

Xiang Biao: It's hard to say which is best, because everyone's experience is different, so the key is who is making the comparison. Oxford could learn something from Singapore, at least in terms of administrative efficiency. Chinese universities could copy Singapore's unflashy way of building a strong research infrastructure.

Wu Qi: How do you set priorities when you make a choice? What are your most important standards in judging an academic structure or system?

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[1] Translator's note: A rhizome is "a prostrate or subterranean root-like stem emitting roots and usually producing leaves at its apex; a rootstock" (Oxford English Dictionary). The French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari suggested that society should be imagined like a rhizome, consisting of horizontal networks that expand in all directions, in contrast to the image of a hierarchical, stable structure. The term has been widely used in social anthropology since the 1980s.

Xiang Biao: My personal feeling is that the overall environment is the most important: What is it like to work there every day? Who is there to talk to? What basic tasks do you have to accomplish? The consideration has to be concrete, because you can only really feel things that are concrete, both intellectually and psychologically.

Readers will have to draw their own conclusions about whether they can create a space for themselves in their particular workplaces. Building their own rhizome-like environments, with the help of people other than colleagues, maybe the most important thing.

Wu Qi: In our Beijing interview you said that your feelings about the Chinese scholarly community are quite weak. What does it ultimately mean for a scholar to have a community?

Xiang Biao: I think a scholarly community is badly needed. China's academic community at present is quite weak because scholarship is institutionalized and formulaic. Think about it, if the Education Ministry decided to launch some kind of reform, there would be no way for scholars to come up with a shared opposition to the reform, which means that no meaningful community exists. Of course, there are intellectual dialogues, but the kind of collaboration where one plus one creates more than two does not happen all that often. Last time I said that I have no sense of community, and this is an objective fact, but it should not be. This is precisely why we need to build a community. Communities only exist when you are consciously building them, even those whose *raison d'être* was there all along, but once they get stagnant they lose their meaning and become associations or conferences. In the process of building a community, you need to discuss and arrive at shared understandings regarding the current state of social reality, academic research, theory, and methods, after which you can settle on a strategy. China desperately needs this kind of localized, unstructured academic community.

Wu Qi: Would you like to be a part of this process?

Xiang Biao: Yes, because if you don't participate, you don't have the sense of community, or that sense is false, merely a symbolic identity. This is even less useful in building a scholarly environment because a lot of real questions get swallowed up in this false symbolism.

Wu Qi: How would you participate, specifically? Have you already started?

Xiang Biao: I've just started. One way is that I am hoping to interact more with friends from the art world. Like I just said, a community needs

difference, and scholars and artists may be able to build a community because of their differences. They can learn from one another, attract one another, and conflict with one another.

The second is a project we are promoting at the Minzu University of China* and at Beida on doing ethnographic research overseas. This is a huge shortcoming in Chinese anthropology. If we don't address it, it will affect Chinese social science and China's national strength, because China's understanding of the world will be limited to commerce, military affairs, and diplomacy. I would like to build a community here. There is no way to know if we will be able to suggest policies to the government, nor should we worry about it too much; our goal is to create a certain empathy for the world among the Chinese people in general. When Chinese young people go back-packing, how should they view places with which they are unfamiliar? Through observing and understanding other people, they should problematize themselves and redefine social issues on which they hold preconceived notions. Chinese scholarship in China is in a rut. We've got a handle on a lot of the old questions, do not often come up with new questions, and we explain the old questions the same old way. It might be stimulating to work outside of China. In addition, this could train future diplomats, because if they study abroad, they will learn about different cultures, customs, and habits, and learn to speak the language. They will have been to these places, and will know how to take the bus, and know what the educational system is like; this kind of knowledge can be very important.

Building Your Own Cross-Border Worlds

Wu Qi: "Building your own cross-border worlds" is an interesting expression. Today, young people from all walks of life have this opportunity, and maybe they are engaged in it. How do you think we should build these worlds? What do they ultimately mean?

Xiang Biao: Max Weber said that rationality can be an iron cage, so we all yearn to resist the system through our own little organic, human worlds that get us closer to our reality. As I said before, the more diverse and plural a small community is, the stronger its power of resistance, and it will be all the more organic. If it is transnational, this first means that it will be quite diverse. An important feature of any system is that it is spatially closed, and can be closely linked to the state and bureaucratic structures, which means that this type of system cannot easily be transnational. Transnational should mean that you can't readily figure out where the borders are. The logic of transnational is that you can break through state and national systems to create an alternative space. This collision of multiple visions can be a powerful stimulus to your thinking.

A little world is not a cozy nest. For scholars, a little world is first a process of construction and next a process of constant agitation. You build it, but then it forces you, stimulates you to think about yourself, to criticize yourself, and constantly breaks down how you used to understand things. The more active and agitated it is, the greater the feeling of security it will give you, because you live to think, and if you have the feeling that you are always thinking, you won't feel fearful, because your

mind is alive. A transnational community gives you more stimulation and a greater sense of security. A meaningful little world necessarily obliges you to constantly doubt yourself, reflect on yourself, change yourself, and surpass yourself, but at the same time, it all happens quite naturally.

Wu Qi: What is the true function of this kind of transnational network for local scholarly output, thought, and practice? Even if it produces rich and beneficial exchanges, can these truly be absorbed locally?

Xiang Biao: In terms of knowledge production, how the local engages with the global without being consumed by the global is indeed a challenge. The anthropologist Anna Tsing (b. 1952) has talked about the evolution of the global knowledge system. For example, in the botanical classification system, the Swedish biologist Linnaeus used Latin to create a global nomenclature, but the foundational knowledge on which this system relies comes from everywhere. African plants were surely originally described in African languages, including their names, uses, and significance, but when the world knowledge system absorbed this information it used the Latin-based classification system, simply replacing African and Asian specificities. This means that the formation of a global knowledge system equals the elimination of local knowledge. Once the system is complete, if you want to study botany, you have to know Latin. So first, we need to be wary of what we call "international" or "global," because these are man-made systems, and what is truly global only exists in countless places scattered throughout the world. Beethoven belongs to the world, but he first was European, not African, and not Latino. Why should European music be more "global" than African music? This is a problem.

Second, we have to be clear about what "local" means. When we meet our friends from Uganda and Scotland, we want to understand their "local" experiences and at the same time we want to build commonalities, and at that point, the question of "scale" becomes crucial. The question of scale asks when and how locality becomes trans-local commonality. Where do we start to overlap? In the commonality that we build, what experiences are abstracted, refined, and eliminated? We need to be clear about all of this. Both "global" and "local" are man-made. When you put together a transnational community, this doesn't mean you are bringing anything extra to the local players, but instead recognizing the rich meanings that the local had all along, and energizing its capacity.

Wu Qi: Might the research you did for *Global "Body Shopping"* serve as a concrete model for teasing out relations between the local and the global?

Xiang Biao: The point of *Global "Body Shopping"* was that the global expansion of the economic system is built on these local foundations. It is partly because of its caste system and its marriage system that India provides the human resources that sustain the global system. The global IT economy is of course man-made, so we have to ask who is doing the work behind it? How are they able to do it? Where do the people come from? Why do they do that? You have to look at questions like personality, ethnicity, and training systems. This might be a pretty good example to look at the global system from a local place, trying to see how it was put together step by step.

Wu Qi: How do you view the scholarly framing of "East Asian modernity?" A priori, this would mean seeing China, Japan, and Korea as a whole or as a unit, which does not seem to accord with where you are going.

Xiang Biao: You are right that I am not promoting the idea of an East Asian community. Some people are doing that, and there is nothing wrong with it, but I don't see the value, because this is not creating an organic community, but rather a label.

Universities Should Look for the Exceptional

Wu Qi: To continue our discussion of community, perhaps we can be a bit more concrete. What sort of expectations should we have of universities today? What should universities be doing?

Xiang Biao: Universities function differently in different eras. In China, we have entered a period where material conditions are pretty good and the education level is quite high in urban areas, so "social reproduction" is becoming increasingly important. As we discussed before, many problems will not be resolved through economic redistribution alone, which by itself will not address "people's diverse needs for material, spiritual and cultural life",[1] which is very real. Given this, what kind of people our universities should be turning out is an important question.

Wu Qi: Are there any historical examples of university education that comes close to what you are envisioning?

Xiang Biao: Not really. Universities in the 1960s were exceptions, naturally, in Europe and in the United States, and places like Oxford always had all sorts of strange people, but this has to do with their aristocratic background. Aristocrats can be exceptional if they want to. Some radical left-wing people came from the most privileged families, and they read a lot and turned their backs on their roots, making sacrifices for the life of the mind.

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[1] Translator's note: The quotation is from Xi Jinping's Work Report to the Nineteenth Party Congress.

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In China, after the founding of the PRC, we experimented with open-door schooling,[2] with the abolition of the examination system, and with worker-peasant-soldier schools, which were all good ideas. At the end of the 1970s, we restored the college entrance exam. How should we understand this? Looking back now at 40 years of reform and opening, we all seem to see the restoration of the entrance exam as something completely natural, as if society had restored its basic rationality and returned to normal. But whose "normal" was this? For 90% of the peasants, whether the exam system was abolished or not made little difference, but the resumption of the exam system immediately reunited former bureaucrats and urban intellectuals. It was actually a new alliance between the Party and the elites in the socialist system of that era.

Wu Qi: The examples you give, the 1960s, etc., all seem to have been in the process of confronting a certain opponent with which they are dissatisfied, they are criticizing and challenging it. Is it our expectation that it is only under such circumstances that universities will be mobilized to create new thinking?

Xiang Biao: This is not quite the same thing as the "exception" we have been talking about. If we are talking about a consensus that has come together in the face of a formidable enemy, like in Japan at Tokyo University in the 1960s, when the slogan was "down with imperialism, dissolve Tokyo University," and when male students faced the US Embassy when they took a piss, this was a historical exception, but this cannot last long, and this experience has limited direct reference value for us. When faced with a strong common enemy, everyone wants to resist, which has been necessary at certain moments in history, but this comes with its own problems, including oversimplification, which puts even more limits on intellectual creativity.

The exceptions I am talking about are more individual. Universities themselves may not be exceptions, but universities should allow and encourage everyone to look for exceptions. Universities are moderate places, not angry places. In today's generally moderate climate, if everyone looks for the exceptional when we do not have a common enemy, it might take us even deeper. We ourselves might be the enemy, which means that we will have to think a bit harder. We will need to pay

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[2] Translator's note: Open-door schooling (*kaimen banxue*) was a Cultural Revolution-period initiative to break through the elitist, institutionalized educational system and bring schooling closer to the people.

closer attention to people around us and think about their life carefully. Two years ago, students at Beida did a study of people who work on campus, and the support staff, in order to understand more about what their life is like, and the result attracted some public attention. This is something that university students should do. This might not necessarily be looking for the exceptional, but it is already a couple of steps outside of the mainstream, and already has achieved good results.

Wu Qi: Is this kind of exception also the source of Beida's sense of its own centrality, which it has had since the May Fourth movement? Is it the same thing that you criticized about intellectuals and the elite?

Xiang Biao: Beida thinks it is leading history forward, that when they are opposing something they are pushing history forward, in the right direction. So Beida thinks the essence of its action is not opposition, but progress, which is different from resistance. Resistance is something that the weak do, like peasants who try to pay fewer taxes and live their lives without outside interference, but Beida is all about heroism, progress, and shaking things up. From a scholarly perspective, resistance should be linked with doubt or skepticism, but Beida isn't like this, and always insists that it is right, and at the center of the action. At particular moments in history, such as the May Fourth period of the 1980s, it made sense, but this attitude gets dangerous after a while. I worry about Beida's self-confidence, it's feeling that it has a firm grasp on history and truth.

Wu Qi: What are your feelings about the Chinese scholarly world? I feel sort of pessimistic and powerless about the current state of culture, education, and art, and sometimes I have a hard time with the general silence and inaction, which is probably one of the reasons why we wanted to do this interview.

Xiang Biao: It's true that in general there is not that much interesting stuff going on. To tell the truth, scholarly progress in China has been slower than I thought it would be. I thought that given all the changes and all the interesting things that people were talking about, something would come of it, but there doesn't seem to be a lot of analysis, which is quite strange.

Problematizing Individual Experience

Wu Qi: Since you published *Zhejiang Village* and *Global "Body Shopping,"* the Chinese world hasn't seen any more books from you, but at the same time we can read any number of specialized articles on theory or methodology. Does this represent some kind of change in your scholarly trajectory?

Xiang Biao: In a certain sense, Singapore marked an endpoint, because I finished my book *Global "Body Shopping"* there. But from another perspective, Singapore marked the starting point of a new period, when I started to feel like scholarship should be like singing or dancing. After I left Singapore to return to Oxford, I started my project on Northeast China, which meant rebuilding links to China. But I felt like it wasn't interesting enough just to do another case study, and I needed to go think about something bigger. The topic of my China research at the time was "intermediaries in labor export," which did not strike me as deep enough.

What allowed me to transition was a series of articles I wrote in Chinese. There was "The World, Scholarship, and the Self," which in fact was a summing up of various things. Then there was "Looking for a New World—Changes in How Modern and Contemporary China Understand 'the World,'" in which I was also looking to find my own place. I started doing research and giving talks in China. One talk I gave at Zhongshan University* was "How Ordinary People Understand the State." They all had to do with discussions of the world, the state, and globalization. These questions were not directly related to my earlier work, but

I noticed some of them while doing my earlier research. I learned an important lesson while working on Zhejiang Village. While I and my university friends went there to set up the social work team, trying to help the people in the village to protect and organize themselves, so that their lives outside the state system would be better, they were hoping to establish relations with the state through us at Beida, so as to better fit into the system. Later on, when I was working on international migrant labor, or the activities of intermediaries, or filing petitions, or other questions, I gradually came to have new ideas about this lesson, and wanted to tackle it at a deeper level, but then found that I did not have the theoretical resources. I also realized that these big questions had been addressed historically in many interesting ways, which I knew nothing about. Partly in order to catch up in this regard, with Wang Hui and some other people I started to work on a reader called *Debating China*. We've been working on this for a long time, and I still don't know when it will be done, but I'm proud of it, and I learned a great deal while doing it.

Had I not experienced this transition, I might not have written my essays on Hong Kong, or on young people, which were of a different style from my previous work. And without those essays, we might not be talking to one another here. In the past, other people may have felt that I was a good scholar, but that I wasn't someone addressing important public issues. Actually, I like this kind of issue, which is connected to my Beida experience, so when I wrote those essays I felt at ease and happy. Now the challenge is how to deepen my thinking and link everything up with my research agenda. Because these more theoretical things are all over the place and quite ambitious and require a lot of imagination, it is really hard to test them, and you need data from a great many sources. As an individual scholar, there is no way to resolve this in the short term, because once your thinking has extended in many directions, the material you look at is all spread out, too, and any one source may yield any number of conclusions, so you often need more sources to confirm or supplement what you've done, all of which means that it is hard to know what step to take next in your research life. I am constantly exploring, and have written many drafts for many projects, which I then set aside. For instance, I signed a book contract for the Northeast China project in 2008, so it's been ten years and I haven't been able to finish it. I'm sort of at a loss as to how to improve.

At the same time, I have started writing commentaries as a way of sustaining my thinking. For example, I am now writing a piece on

Beijing's "cleanup" of migrants in 2017, which is hard to do, because I need a lot of information that is not easy to get. Also, because it is topical and I want to get it out on time, and because the process of the cleanup was itself complicated. Writing something with which you are satisfied on this kind of topic is very difficult, it's scary.

For the past few months, I've been working along three lines. One is looking at some specific questions, which are half-scholarly and half-public. I'm writing the preface to the Chinese translation of Matthew Desmond's *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, which is a commentary and expresses some of my own ideas on the matter. This line of work does not add all that much, it mainly applies what I know already, and is fairly easy to do. The second is to follow up on the question of the migrant population cleanup in Beijing. Since 2001, and especially after the abolition of the forced custody and repatriation system in 2003, policy toward the migrant population became relatively loose, even if there was no basic breakthrough on the question of household registration. So how could there be such a big change at the end of 2017? Was the 2017 cleanup the same as those before 2003? I think they are different, and that what we are seeing now is a new use of power, but it is hard to explain this clearly. This is an issue that I was not prepared for, but once the incident occurred, I felt like someone should take a look at it. The third area is my big topics, such as work on migrant populations and especially on infrastructural power; there is also social reproduction-driven labor migration, because social reproduction has become a driving force in today's economy; and then there is the issue of religion and ethnicity.

So the first group of projects is quite visible, but they are sideline projects and not really a burden. The second group of projects is important because they represent the work that an intellectual should be doing. The main problem is that I'm having a hard time making progress with the third group of projects. If I didn't have the second and third group of projects, then the first group would become scattered, and I would start repeating myself. I may have bitten off more than I can chew. I had not foreseen things being quite so difficult.

This is a matter of your basic skill level. By basic skills, I mean the capacity to link big themes with concrete data and push things continually forward. I feel like I still have a lot of work to do on this front. In the past what I did was explain something clearly on the basis of concrete data, or write commentaries on some fuzzy, big issues, but if you really want to integrate everything and produce a truly accurate explanation of

a problem, I feel that none of my work has done that yet. I'm currently looking at Western social science research, to see if they have any techniques that lead in this direction. Right now I'm at a loss to know how to cultivate this kind of technique. All of this is related to your individual personality and to what kind of education in the humanities you had. For instance exposure to religion can cultivate a particular kind of temperament and can make you more sensitive to how other people understand life, death, and misfortune. I find that some anthropologists with religious feelings do interesting work because they look at these aspects very carefully.

Wu Qi: Which authors and which books achieved the sort of standard you are talking about?

Xiang Biao: There are a lot of classics in anthropology. The author that influenced me the most was probably Paul Willis. His *Learning to Labour* has already been translated into Chinese.

Wu Qi: When you talk about difficulties with your transition, it is in fact an example of problematizing individual experience. When you were doing your post-doc at Singapore, you surely did not think about explaining anything on the basis of your individual experience. Is it possible that personal experience can be some kind of bridge, or at least a medium for asking questions when dealing with the need to connect concrete data to larger issues?

Xiang Biao: That's a great way to put it. In my case, the origin of problematizing my individual experience was dissatisfaction with myself. I felt like I couldn't achieve any depth no matter what I did, and that it wasn't interesting. So I started to complain and blamed the system, my parents, and my youth. This began the process of problematizing. The individual experience itself is not all that important, but problematizing individual experience is an important method. We want to understand the world, not ourselves, and the question now is from what angle we should understand the world and understand ourselves. So problematizing our individual experiences is a concrete start in our effort to understand the world. If I am dissatisfied with myself, and take a look at my experience of growing up, I will be looking at my relationship with the world, wondering how other people can see things that I have been unable to, which ultimately brings me increasingly in touch with a concrete world.

Your individual experience is not a natural occurrence, but is part of a certain environment, with its own history, origin, and limitations. Problematizing it does not mean making it into something negative, or getting

rid of it, but is instead a better way to embrace it. When I problematized my weak points I came to understand how I got here, and how to live with my limitations. This is the opposite of loving yourself because you are looking outward, objectifying your experience. This is a good psychological exercise, and once you have problematized your individual experience you can be calm. Not that you will have seen through things, quite the opposite—what you understand is that life is complicated and ever-changing. Here's my place in this world, which often makes me unhappy, but I come to terms with the facts, "accept my fate but do not accept defeat." Having to struggle is not the problem. Struggle is a part of life, and if I have to choose between struggling and not struggling, I will definitely choose to struggle.

Wu Qi: When we first started this interview, you were worried about talking too much about your individual life, but over the course of our conversation, it looks like you discovered that taking yourself as a subject, or problematizing your individual experience, might indeed be effective.

Xiang Biao: At the outset, I truly had not thought about this, but as we talked it occurred to me that it was a good way to discuss certain questions. Beginning with personal experience, then proceeding to bigger questions, and how to bring the two together, this is problematizing. Experience itself becomes something you need to explain. In the beginning, we were talking more about ideas and how to intervene in society, and I thought that individual experience was just a background factor, but it turns out to be a basic source material of thinking. As to how precisely to problematize it, you need to know a lot of things, like what the educational system was like when you went to primary school, what the social and economic conditions were—you have to have this historical knowledge; you also need some comparative observations about how other classmates did and how they have grown up. So individual experience is an entry point, to which you have to add a fair bit of knowledge to fill it out and reach larger issues. Any style of thinking that gets to the bottom of things is linked and connected to other things. What does "connected" mean? We have said this word many times. "Connect" means to return to practice, because practice is always connected! How do you get back to practice? Practice is so fluid and relentless, and grasping it is not easy. Personal experience is the starting point to start learning to grasp praxis.

New Research

Wu Qi: We have talked a good bit about your public talks and your interviews in the media, which might be seen as the more social side of your work, which was part of our original intention, but on reflection, it seems like we have talked less about your research activities. Is there a relationship between the two?

Xiang Biao: We haven't talked all that much about my research because the topics I am working on are rather specific. For example, in my work on overseas labor placement agencies, I'm looking at how governments, international organizations, and NGOs regulate labor mobility, in terms of recruitment and other practices. The central issue here is the relationship between bureaucracy and the market. Labor migration is now basically treated as a transaction in the market, but this market is absolutely not a typical, flat market, but is instead hierarchical and structured like an administrative system. We generally think of market and bureaucracy as being opposites, but marketization itself quickly leads to hierarchy. Why is this? On the one hand, the market has its own internal momentum, because to maximize profits, it relies on monopoly and control of upstream resources. A second reason is that, at present, governments and international organizations are increasingly emphasizing the protection of human rights and orderly mobility, and they have created many regulations in this sense. This in turn increases the legitimacy of certain commercial intermediaries, because they have the ability to process the paperwork properly, creating the impression that they are respecting

the regulations and protecting workers, or at least avoiding unfortunate incidents. After they master this process, they use this ability to protect their position in the market and seize excess profits. Completing paperwork for migrants becomes their main source of profits, instead of actual recruitment and the daily work of labor management. They farm out the recruitment tasks to smaller companies, who may engage in any number of practices that are more or less legal.

To take another example, social reproduction is closely related to student mobility, because now, learning English and studying abroad are no longer simply something to add to your CV, but are meant to fundamentally change you as a person and how you live your life. Parents in China are no longer thinking that they want their children to get a foreign degree so as to get a good job, and instead, they are thinking that education in China goes against human nature and takes away a child's natural sense of happiness, so studying abroad is about protecting their basic human nature. This is not a simple question of ideas about education, this ultimately is a question of how society reproduces itself.

For a while, I was thinking about studying the Muslims from China's northwest who go to the southeast coast to work as Arabic-Chinese interpreters. Some of them used to be troubled youth who dropped out of school in the northwest and got into a lot of fights. Their parents were worried that they would get in trouble, so they sent them to madrasas attached to the mosques, where they learned a little Arabic, and then suddenly in the 2000s they had the opportunity to work as translators. I wanted to see how this group understands religion, how they see China, and how, concretely, they fit into Chinese market practices within a global commercial economy in places like Yiwu, in Zhejiang, or Tianhe, in Guangzhou. Fundamentally this is about diversity in China. We know that diversity objectively exists in today's China, but government discourse consistently has a hard time recognizing diversity and is incapable of handling it properly. I spent a long time in preparation and wrote a few things, but now I have basically set it aside.

Ethnic self-rule under socialist conditions comes with a particular politics, which I call transcendent politics. The idea of ethnic self-determination exists within the tradition of European socialism, and Lenin especially emphasized ethnic self-determination and especially cultural autonomy. I read a historical document that said that Lenin was influenced by the friend of his father, a missionary with the Russian Orthodox church, who insisted that missionary work had to be done in the native

language of the people one seeks to convert and that you cannot use Latin or Russian. This is also the common practice of Protestant missionaries. William Soothill, who later taught in Oxford, translated the Bible into the Wenzhou dialect. Across from where my office is now is Wycliffe Hall, which is associated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics and Wycliffe Bible Translators, which translates the Bible into many different languages. So missionaries became the first quasi-anthropologists, with a deep understanding of local cultures. Why this emphasis on local languages? The friend of Lenin's father explained that the only way to truly communicate with God is through your own language. If you have to learn Russian, Latin, or English, you will never get close to God. You have to talk to God in the same language you use when you argue every day, the same language you use to talk to your wife and kids. The emphasis on diversity here has a relationship to transcendence, in the sense that since we have a common future and common ideals, the fact that we are diverse now is nothing to fear, and instead is interesting and to be cherished. Lenin's view of ethnic self-determination was the same idea, that since everyone was working toward Communism, differences in language or lifestyle were not insurmountable. If everyone established Communism using the language and lifestyle that is the most intimate to them, and conversely Communism was realized in different places with different local characters, would this not be great?

Today, many people understand Lenin's position on ethnic self-determination as being simply a utilitarian matter, and argue that Lenin hoped that ethnic minorities would rise up and overthrow the Tsar and destroy the Tsarist system. But it was not so simple. On this front, China handled this quite well in the 1950s, and Han cadres in minority areas had to learn Uighur and Tibetan. But once we lost the transcendent ideal, things changed, which means that we are trying to solve the problem by relying solely on material interests and redistribution.

Wu Qi: That's very interesting research, which in terms of content is related to migration and in terms of its *problématique* is clearly related to a concern for China. Extending things a bit further, it is not surprising that you have talked about the Hong Kong problem as well.

Xiang Biao: At one point, there were lots of dyed-in-the-wool Communist supporters in Hong Kong, like Szeto Wah*,[1] who organized the teachers' union. It was all a matter of ideals. When you have clear political ideals, many people will disagree, but some will agree and follow. Where the trouble came from later on, in my opinion, was something deeper, which was that everything got commercialized, and Hong Kong was not ruled by Hong Kong people, but by the government and rich merchants. Power is delegated to rich people who rule according to their personal interests. This can't work, even in a deeply commercialized place like Hong Kong. My understanding of diversity is different from how it is used as a descriptive term. For me, it is not a simple matter of the existence of different cultures and different personal identities but instead means avoiding a situation in which life is dominated by one-sided financial or profit concerns. So diversity is against homogeneity, against the idea that one homogenous logic comes to dominate public affairs. At present Hong Kong is ruled by authoritarianism and money, the carrot and the stick, both of which have been pushed to extremes. Why is this? Because we have no transcendent common ideals, and there is no social space left. I am not celebrating diversity in a Western sense, arguing that diversity is necessarily good. This isn't the point of my argument. My argument is that once things are homogenous it can be rather dangerous.

Wu Qi: You talked about the sourcebook that you're putting together with Wang Hui and the discussions you have organized for that. Can you tell us a bit about where the project is now?

Xiang Biao: In this reader, we are hoping to explore social debates in modern and contemporary China. We chose ten large topics, which are related to everyone's lives, such as the debate on the idea that women should abandon their jobs and return to their families. This debate started in the 1920s and 1930s and went through a number of twists and turns, and recently someone on the CPPCC brought up the idea again, arguing that it would benefit the stability of employment and the family. We looked at these debates together and over time, trying to see how the arguments developed.

The question of divorce is another one. The author Yu Luojin* (b. 1946) asked for a divorce because she had no feelings for her husband,

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[1] Translator's note: Szeto Wah (1931–2011) was a leftist political activist in Hong Kong throughout his life, organizing teachers unions and ultimately spearheading Hong Kong's democracy movement.

which was a big deal in 1980, when divorce was only granted to part-
ners of counter-revolutionaries. Later on, the Beijing municipal court
approved her request. Now, however, the Supreme People's Court has
passed the "Interpretation of the Marriage Law, version 3," which allows
for considerable discussion of how to divorce, how to divide property
held before divorce, and how to individualize property, all of which
will help the courts make clear rulings on property questions, which
means that divorce will be easier than before. The law basically states
that divorce is possible at any time. For example, if a couple has been
married twenty years, and the woman earns less than the man but has
contributed much more time and effort in the home, this will not count
at the moment of divorce, and all that will count is the property you
recorded in the marriage contract. One part of the reasoning behind the
new ruling is cases where a woman marries a rich man and then quickly
divorces him, asking for half of their common property, and the law wants
to protect the rich man. It is fairly clear whose voice the law is listening
to.

In addition, beginning in 1994, the sociologist Zheng Yefu (b. 1950)*
and the economist Fan Gang (b. 1953)* had a debate on "car civiliza-
tion," in other words, whether China should develop the car industry,
which later included discussions of whether to raise the fuel tax, and
various questions relating to road and car issues, ultimately becoming
a debate on environmental issues, and now there is a debate on global
warming. So we will put all of these debates together, and translate the
original materials into English for international readers. We have not paid
enough overall attention to these kinds of social debates, and in the past
focused more on debates concerning the political line, theory, or policy.

Wu Qi: Will you and Wang add your own explanations or analyses?

Xiang Biao: There will be editorial notes, but not full articles. It is
basically a reader, meant to focus on the social side of things. So this
reflects the opinion of those who participated in the debates, not solely
those who make policy and the experts, but citizens as well, who have
their own viewpoints and their own life experiences. We looked through
magazines like *Banyuetan*∗ from the 1970s and 1980s, which printed a
lot of readers' letters, and sometimes organized discussions around the
themes raised in the letters, and what is interesting is that they identi-
fied the status of the writer, such as student, housewife, soldier, worker,
peasant. More recently, however, the only voices that join in the discus-
sion are those of urban, well-educated people, and even on social media,

we don't hear much from workers. We hope to do a Chinese version later on because a lot of the material should be quite fresh to today's readers in China. The participation and the representativeness of the earlier period are quite different from what we see on social media today, however open we think we are. Of course, that participation was not simple and direct, nor was it spontaneous, and the discussions were organized and directed. This touches on the question of what constitutes leadership. What kind of leadership you are exercising depends on what questions you raise, and how you organize discussions? Not allowing discussion is not exercising leadership power.

Common Ideals

Wu Qi: You said something that struck me as quite important, which was your reference to a "loss of common ideals," in relation to what we were saying about China and history before. Where did you get this concept? Does it come from a particular context? What do you specifically mean by it?

Xiang Biao: It is basically about Hong Kong. A few years ago, I got bored with case studies and instead started to pay attention to problems in the world, feeling like I ought to have a basic grasp on important issues. In fact, I was re-educating myself. The 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China had gone much more smoothly than many of us had imagined it would. This was because there had been shared ideals around building a strong socialist country. There were a small number of Hong Kong people who clearly identified with this, such as the teachers union, and there was also a small number of people who resolutely opposed this, but there was room for debate. Later on, however, everything came to be about money and power, and the common ideals disappeared. Everything became a question of opportunism, and the merchants supported the government in order to cash in. So now there was no narrative and no explanation for anything. So who are the people going to genuinely support? This question merits further reflection as well because, when we first started talking about the market economy and making universities more professional and less bureaucratic, running universities like a company, we thought that we didn't have to rely on common ideals in

order to work together. But what happened now is unexpected. I was thinking about this in the context of my project on Northeast China, how market relations came to be transformed into power relations. Although labor placement is meant to be a purely economic matter, everyone is doing their best to transform profit relationships into hierarchical relationships, which is the only way to better protect commercial interests. This is a result of the loss of common ideals.

Wu Qi: This question is directly linked to another, the even bigger question, which is how we in China understand ourselves today, today being the product of our past common ideals, but how do we finally understand it? Is it different than in the past?

Xiang Biao: There is something really strange here. We seem to be saying now that we want to get back to our common ideals—"don't forget your original intentions"[1]—and that's fine. But this takes us back to what we were talking about before, which is that all of politics is constructed, and relies on countless small universes and countless intermediate processes. If these intermediate processes are still rooted in the usual rigid power structures, then the effort of bringing back ideals at the top may simply become exaggerated performances at the grassroots level. For the past twenty years or so low-level officials have had it easy. They can do whatever they want to, as long as they don't make a mistake. They make sure to protect each other's interests, so you can be a little corrupt and I can be a little corrupt. This level of corruption cannot continue. I support the idea that it is time to re-politicize certain things. But clearly, some people think this only means coming up with slogans, and some people are even using these slogans as weapons, which frightens people at the mid- and grassroots levels. When people are afraid, they can react with extraordinary measures in an attempt to protect themselves. They do not reform themselves rationally, or reconstruct their ideals, but rather knowing that they have already betrayed their ideals, they have to resort to any available means to protect themselves, to the point of trying to silence other people. So, things are complicated now. Some people understand politicization in an abstract sense and act out of emotion. They are not thinking about the living situation of ordinary people. They are not acting like local gentry.

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[1] Translator's note: The idea of "not forgetting one's 'original intention'" is an oft-repeated propaganda point in China, which recycles what was originally Confucian language to try to remind people of the original goals of communism.

Wu Qi: Thinking about the Chinese political situation, if we look again at how ordinary people in China are more and more seeking to prove themselves to the world, then the question becomes even more interesting, in the sense that it looks both reasonable and dangerous. How do you see China and the Chinese people in terms of their self-expectations?

Xiang Biao: We should be thankful to the world for their expectations of China because these expectations express the world's maturity. Many in the West are truly hoping that China will do something and make a contribution, especially in terms of green energy or fighting climate change. Many developing countries also have similar expectations, which is a reaction to the unreasonable power relations in today's world. But mainstream opinion in China today is not talking about doing something different, but about becoming number one, and many basic ways of thinking are similar to what we see in the United States, which to my mind has something to do with our loss of common ideals. When was China most respected in the world? In the 1950s and the 1960s, during the nation-building period. Beginning with the Bandong Conference in 1955, through Mao's creation of the theory of the three worlds in 1974, China had a huge influence internationally and sparked a lot of international discussion and debate.

But the idea of proving oneself is a paradox. If you have to prove yourself, this means you don't have a self, which in turn means that you prove your existence through preexisting standards and markers, through other people's thinking, which means pleasing other people and debasing yourself. For an individual it means asking for recognition, means doing things to be seen, not to be happy. All of this starts from a feeling of insecurity and lack of self-worth. The rise of militarism in Japan was to prove that the Japanese were not inferior to Europe. So you're right: proving yourself can be dangerous.

Local Gentry as Method

Wu Qi: The idea of the gentry is perhaps one concept that threads our conversation together, which may also be one of your particularities, so let's talk about it a little bit more. Today's social structure is no longer like the rural society of the past, and indeed there have been profound changes. Are local gentry still possible?

Xiang Biao: As an attitude, the gentry can exist. The local gentry never really fit in with the larger system, and there was always a certain distance. Their foothold was in their small universe, but they could communicate with and outflank the system, or make use of the system. They had their own understanding of the system. From this perspective, it is entirely possible for the gentry to exist today, but anyone who wants to be a member of the gentry must first understand their own little world and have a firm grasp on the system as well. The difference is that in the past, the gentry lived and acted in the world of the rural villages, and was very clear on their material origins, while this question of material origins is quite different now, and we need to understand it in a new way. Today's small worlds are not self-sufficient, but instead are constructed, and have no material boundaries. Precisely because they are constructed, the principles behind the construction are a crucial matter, and when you construct your own little world, you have to define it, and decide what you will do in it, what the principles are, what ends you are serving.

Wu Qi: In modern society, people are divided among all sorts of specialized institutions, such as companies, schools, bookstores, shops,

etc., and most of these organizations have leaders. Can we understand these leaders as latent gentry?

Xiang Biao: The key point may be how much those leaders are hoping to be promoted to higher levels, and how much being an official is important to them. The gentry have to be a part of their world, their people, and to represent these people. They don't look for promotions. The gentry has to fully understand the demands and interests of these people and has to express these demands in a language that the official system can understand, that will have an impact on the system, and to which the system will have to react. In this sense, the gentry of the artistic world and the gentry from villages would have no trouble sitting down for a chat, because they share many strategies. The next question is whether the gentry are the same as civil society, NGOs, and activists. My feeling is that they are not too alike. The gentry don't have a priori, preset goals, and their goal is not to engage in social movements. The important thing is that they represent a group of people, and what they do is continually convey their situation, so the gentry are a kind of representative, whose role is to analyze, understand, and represent; they are shapers of discourse, and also makers of local rules.

Wu Qi: It sounds like representatives to the People's Congresses in our political system.

Xiang Biao: This was the original idea, to replace the gentry with the representatives of the People's Congresses, but the issue is complicated. Many people argue that the modern state-building project at the beginning of the twentieth century led local bullies who served state interests to replace community-oriented gentry, or resource-grabbing, selfish gentry to replace what was originally a more cultured gentry. The people's representatives are meant to be the local representatives of the grassroots populations, and if we can make the system of popular assemblies work properly, then we will have modernized the gentry. The people's representatives should discuss policy from the perspective of the small worlds of which they are a part. But contemporary representatives are divided by profession and redistributed to fill quotas, and they wind up being quite distant from those they are meant to represent, so the organic quality of representation is lost.

Wu Qi: What's the difference between the gentry and public intellectuals as presented in popular discourse in China at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

Xiang Biao: I think the difference is pretty big. In my view, one important thing about establishment intellectuals is that they want to articulate universal principles and see themselves as critics. The gentry are moderate and are not concerned with criticism based on universal principles. Their point of view is rooted in the local world, and they have no sense of moral superiority over the system. An important part of the gentry's job is protecting the well water or responding when someone's chickens are stolen. Relying solely on principles won't do—you have to figure out what it means that someone stole someone else's chickens right before Spring Festival. This is different from today's public intellectuals.

In continental Europe, especially France, there are what they call public intellectuals. Their thinking can be idealistic, sometimes radical, and revolutionary. It is quite different from Britain. Britain does not have this kind of prescribed role for intellectuals, although of course there are countless commentators in newspapers, and thus a lot of organic voices, but no opinion leader emerges to shock people with his ideas. Instead, it is rather conservative, so when Fei Xiaotong came to Britain he felt right at home, with his Yangzi Valley gentry temperament, which was quite similar to that of his British counterparts.

Wu Qi: Since the gentry temperament is itself moderate, is it more likely to produce social reform rather than radical social movements?

Xiang Biao: Probably. But the idea that because gentry are conservative, we don't need revolutions, or revolutions are always bad, is wrong-headed. We have a lot of people who talk about revolution today, but they cannot explain why revolution is not happening even when the system is illegitimate. The gentry would be better at explaining things like what the people are thinking, what their relationship with the system is, and how they are getting by. So if we had a few more gentry-style intellectuals, this would not slow the progress of society. They cannot hold society back and would have a more comprehensive, accurate grasp on things. In non-revolutionary times, they are good at pushing changes forward, but when revolution becomes necessary, this means that there has been a rupture between the gentry and the system. So we can't take the gentry as a specific social group, but rather as representing a research perspective, or a method.

Wu Qi: Can you explain a bit more what "taking the gentry as method" might mean?

Xiang Biao: First, I am not talking here about the gentry as an existing group that we find in the population, but rather as individual temperament, or a way of thinking. Is your first reaction to get angry or to be curious? Do you make an effort to describe things clearly in a moderate, or even humorous, way, or do you rush to judgment? It is in this sense that I like how the gentry comport themselves, by observing life from the inside out. For example, having received a Western education, I know that peasants are wrong to prefer sons to daughters, but you can't simply dismiss their feelings, and instead have to understand how their lives are set up, knowing what you can change, and what you allow to evolve on its own.

Second, whether we could really recreate the gentry as an actual social group or a social force, strikes me as quite doubtful. Of course, it is not completely impossible, and "local" doesn't have to refer only to villages; any place has people who like to observe and who have good memories in ways that recall the gentry. But in theory, we still have to slowly move toward a system of political parties, organizing social life through professional groups, rather than relying on the moral order and imperial order maintained by the gentry.

Wenzhou Interview, December 2018

Setting the Stage

Xiang Biao: Coming back to Wenzhou this time inspired me with a lot of thoughts and feelings. On this trip, I went from Oxford to Beijing and then from Beijing to Wenzhou, and the three worlds are very different. Oxford is quiet and the rhythm is slow. Beijing is fast and busy, with a sort of forthrightness about the business at hand, like you have to make decisions very quickly and move on to the next thing. Here in Wenzhou, I'm meeting up with classmates from high school, which is a completely different kind of setting. But at the same time, academic language describes all three of these places in the same way, in the sense that we basically call them all "neoliberal." The three places are linked together but also remain completely different. I'm confused, too, because it's not only that the language does not describe the real world, but that an increasingly homogeneous language is increasingly unable to represent a fragmented world. Everyone appears to be the same in terms of how they think, how they express their feelings, and what symbols they use, even while they are widely different in terms of income, standard, and quality of living, so it is hard to tell whether these lifestyles really are the same. I don't know how to explain this theoretically. This is a serious problem for the social sciences.

Wu Qi: You travel a lot between these three places. Is this the first time you have felt this on coming back to visit?

Xiang Biao: Yes. When I was talking with some radical or near-radical students in Beijing they told me two things. The first was that when they

went to help some of the migrant workers who had been "cleaned up" in 2017, they found huge gaps between themselves and the migrants, in terms of the workers' understanding of family relations, their needs at the time, and what the students could offer them or in terms of discourse. The second was that aside from the fact that they had not gone to university and did not have a diploma, the workers were basically no different from them. They talk the same way and watch the same shows. Everyone lives on their cellphone, whether it's Huawei, Xiaomi, or Apple. Both of these observations ring true.

There is something that really surprises me, which is that there are some young people who are much more radical than I expected. This sends a message, which is that the condition of "suspension" can lead to two outcomes. One is anxiety because when everyone is constantly busy and running around, certain basic ideas of life can become very conservative, as we see in the so-called new familyism, Chinese-style forced marriages, the idea that you have to have children, you have to buy a house…This is all linked to this homogeneity. Because you "suspended" yourself from the present in the rush toward an elusive future, the life you're living now cannot take on meaning. It's sort of like fundamentalism, where home and family become the only things that sustain you. The flip side of this new conservatism is radicalism, where you feel that because diverse and contradictory things are hard to understand or value, you feel like revolutionary, comprehensive, earth-shaking changes are needed, and everything else is illusory, false, and oppressive. The idea of "suspension" explains why the Chinese economy grows so fast, why everyone pursues the same goal, all struggling for themselves, working like crazy to make money, which produces these two latent problems. What help do you think Chinese intellectuals can offer to these students?

Wu Qi: Practically speaking, in today's climate, my feeling is that no teacher is courageous enough to help them. Before the students went to try to help the migrant workers, teachers at the school tried to talk them out of it. The teachers simply repeated the same language, they made no effort to understand why the students wanted to do what they did. But there's nothing for them outside of school either, no work unit, no system, they didn't know who to ask for help except to talk to their peers. They weren't looking for someone to save them but would have welcomed some insight into the situation, or some shared experience, but we intellectuals don't have any concrete experience, and can only share

our common sense or our own judgment of the situation, or at the least, we can offer a little comfort. So all of this is quite hard for them.

Xiang Biao: This is a real challenge, and something society needs to respond to.

Wu Qi: Let's talk a bit more about the specifics of your research. We talked about this a bit before just to flesh things out without focusing on it, but now it seems to me that the preoccupations and motivations behind your research are in and of themselves the direct responses of one scholar to social conditions, and perhaps even more urgent and direct than our chats about your life at Beida and in Oxford and Singapore. They directly reveal how we should raise questions and concerns, and how we should solve problems. For this reason, I think your empirical research should also become an additional thread in our discussion, and I thought we might delve into it now.

Xiang Biao: Good idea. Scholarship is a kind of intervention, and I'm a living person who wants to express my own thoughts about life in this world. By "intervention" I mean that what we write should touch our readers' souls, and stimulate their thinking, all of which we've talked about before. The point of art is not to create a beautiful, harmonious world, but rather to enable you to face what is ugly.

"Accept your fate without accepting defeat" makes the same point. The most direct reason why we are anxious is that we lack a clear understanding of today's world, and wind up feeling that we are always in the wrong place. This is why I pay attention to non-fiction writing. To me, it is a kind of emphasis on "authenticity" in an aesthetic sense, that is to say, the real has its own beauty even if it appears in an unpleasant guise. In the 2010s, young people started to have the confidence to value things they felt were real. Before, people derived meanings from grand, fabricated, abstract expressions, because they felt that real things didn't have meaning in and of themselves, and could only be understood by shining the light of grand narrative on them. Now young people are saying that we don't have to make judgments, nor do we have to start from lofty principles. We can just talk about our experience, which can be random, but as long as it's real it has meaning. This kind of breezy self-confidence is relatively new and has to do with young people's educational level and urban lifestyle. This is not a solution in and of itself and is mixed together with all sorts of anxieties, but it provides a solid foundation for people to advance in their thinking.

Wu Qi: Let me push back a little here. Every time you start to praise non-fiction I feel a certain doubt, maybe because part of my work is in this field. On the one hand, I agree that the lives of today's youth are more immersed in reality than in the past few generations, but I can't help but wonder how "authentic" that "reality" is. Are they really curious? Are they in pursuit of real things? It is also possible that every generation of young people is the same, in the sense that they are easily aroused and want to participate, but without getting in too deep and doing something concrete. All they do is ask questions. To speak more specifically about media and cultural circles, everyone has been directly influenced by the intellectual culture of the 1980s and 1990s and feels called upon to make grand gestures, and a good deal of their pain and anxiety comes from their self-expectation in this sense. But as time moves forward, they come to see more clearly that these gestures are useless and have no real impact on things. They are weak and even laughable. To me, we are living in a moment when young people realize the historical burden they are bearing. Intellectual leaders have left the scene, leaving us without norms or guidance, and everybody now talks about concrete plans instead of abstract issues, so that some older intellectuals are now pointing their fingers at young people, saying that what the youth are doing is wrong, which only increases their spirit of rebellion. It's as if different generations of intellectuals don't know how to communicate, and wind up blaming one another, losing confidence in one another, and both seeing the worst in one another. I don't know whether this judgment holds for other professions, but for university students and people working in cultural industries, it is pretty obvious and widespread.

Xiang Biao: This is quite a deep issue, thanks for your insights. "Truth" and "honesty" contain three dimensions: what is "true," what is "honest," and what is "real." The youth you are talking about dare to express themselves honestly, and their feelings about their own experience are also direct. They will not easily suppress these feelings, so there is an honest self there. Looking carefully at language can sometimes help us think through things. For example, when we say "true" (*zhen*)* or "real" (*shi*)* and "fake" (*xu*)* or "false" (*jia*)*, we used to use "fake" rather than "false." Because to say something is false, you first have to know what is true, but in the past, because of propaganda and grand discourses, we could not tell true from false, so we sort of vaguely referred to all the formal expressions as "fake." Now everyone has turned against "fake." These days we might fabricate things, and when necessary resort to tricks,

but we won't be "fake" with people, using big and empty words without saying what we want. Sometimes we are fed up with "political correct-ness," not because it is wrong or false, but because it sounds "fake and empty," and does not allow people to express themselves directly. To my mind, having an honest self, even if it is somewhat reduced, is much better than having a lofty, if empty, self.

Yet after becoming honest, it seems like they have not reflected further on reality. This means that they are not entirely clear on the distinction between what is "true," that is, principles that you cannot feel directly but need nonetheless to defend and pursue, and what is "real," that is, what their hearts tell them based on their life experience. As you said, young people's rebellion against their elders and their dislike of political correctness are both honest, but does this honesty represent a better understanding of our current lives? Does it express a new under-standing of our historical experience? Not necessarily. The populism that everyone is experiencing all over the world can to a great extent be understood as a rupture between what is "honest" and what is "true." Many people who voted for Trump are good, honest people. What are we to do? As a scholar, my thought is that the tools we have for thinking and expressing ourselves are not diverse enough. Bourgeois political correctness and universal values pretty much monopolize the public conversation, becoming the only way to express "truth." Now everyone is starting from a posture of "honesty," and is slowly coming to express their experience. If we keep going this way, then we can keep the honesty that approaches the truth, and let slide the kind of "gotcha" honesty fueling anti-political correctness, and maybe then we can slowly link honesty with important issues. This is something I hope for.

Social Reproduction

Wu Qi: To return to our main topic. Why, today, are you researching, and especially focusing on, social reproduction? Is this an idea that you discovered while working on migration, which put it on your radar, or is it something more recent?

Xiang Biao: This is recent. My past research focused on material production, value transfers, and structural analyses of socioeconomic inequality and institutional arrangements. While in *Global "Body Shopping"* I did talk about dowries and marriage, the experiences I examined are not particularly rich. The "social reproduction" I talked about in the book viewed people as a factor in production. I talked about how they invest in education, in IT training, and then how graduates moved away to large cities, looking for high-paying jobs that would allow them to pay off their investment in education. In this sense, I treated human production as a process of material production. But Vani said something to me that I found quite profound. She said that parents do not raise their children just to work in IT. Parents invest in education also because they have a sense of duty and love. Sometimes there is no plan, they don't know why they are doing what they are doing, maybe to honor their ancestors, but no matter what the reason is, it is not simply that they raise their children in order for them to work in IT service jobs. There are a lot of intermediary steps, and I overlooked them.

I slowly came to focus on the importance of human lives. In fact, it had something to do with age, as I eventually came to feel that I could

not move readers with that kind of stiff academic language. We can do all the structural analyses we want to, but when we are living our lives, they do not seem so structured. So this was the first thing.

Second, in terms of educating the young generation and taking care of the elderly generation, I noticed certain global changes and realized that "social reproduction" was becoming more and more important. "Social reproduction" is not the same as "human production." "Human production" refers to how all people are trained to become an important element in production, related to such concepts as "human capital," while "social reproduction" refers to how people reproduce themselves—they are the goal.

In the history of humanity, the vast majority of our labor is spent on "social reproduction," gathering wild fruits, hunting, plowing, and planting. The goal is not to accumulate profit, nor to make a killing, but simply to sustain ourselves. Once we're a bit richer, then the level at which we sustain ourselves goes up as well, and we indulge in a bit more ritual and leave a bit more sacrificial meat for the ancestors. So this is the general cycle, and it is a cycle that has been broken by modernity. Modernity is closely linked to capitalism, and the point of human activities is not to sustain ourselves, but rather to make a killing. This is the structural transition from an agricultural society to an industrial society. People found themselves further and further away from the center, and economic activity was basically about the movement of capital. Past economic activity had been part of social activities and was there to serve the people, but modern economic life broke away from that. Indeed, not only did it break away, it came to be the most important force molding social relations, and under these circumstances, "social reproduction" came to be ignored.

In addition, if you look at basic trends in world population mobility, the economic position of Asia and China is rising, which is in contradiction with Asia's and China's position in international migration, because economic growth has not been accompanied by a decline in outward population flows, nor has there been any obvious increase in the number of foreigners migrating to China. So increases in people's income levels and ease of lifestyle strangely led to an unprecedented increase in desires to go abroad—to study abroad, to go to the United States to give birth, to emigrate as "investor migrants" by buying government bonds or assets in the host country. How do we explain this? Another thing we should look at is changes in capitalism itself. Who are the big players now? Big

platforms are making the most money now. The second biggest player has to do with services like education, medical treatment, and entertainment that have to do with "human reproduction." The third major player might be mining and agriculture, which are called primary industries. In comparison, manufacturing, the industry that drove classical capitalism, is in decline. But manufacturing is on the rise in Asia and China because they are the world's factories. If we look at human mobility, the original developed countries remain the center of the businesses linked to "social reproduction," and these include education, medical care, and various kinds of knowledge production, as well as lifestyle trends. If we put the changes in capitalism together with the population flows I talked about earlier, it would seem that we have our explanation: why is it that as Chinese people are getting rich they want to leave as soon as they make money? An important reason is that immigration is not about making money, but rather about "social reproduction," about a more stable and more predictable future, about better education for your children, cleaner air, and more green space. Now, having lived through my own personal changes, and having linked "social reproduction" with global politics and economics, and at the same time having observed immigration flows, and analyzed the source of profits within capitalism, I would like to remind everyone of something: Asia's rise and China's rise are only one part of the whole picture, and "social reproduction" is a more important part.

Wu Qi: When you talk about changes in the life of an individual, what specifically are you talking about? What have advances in this kind of research managed to accomplish?

Xiang Biao: I'll give you a recent example. I have a relative whose child is in middle school, and the parents are wondering whether they should send her abroad for high school, basically because the pressure in China's educational system is too intense, which is having bad effects on children's health. Even some children whose grades are very good to take a nap in the evening and then get up at three in the morning to do their homework. Because of long-term stress, their immune systems are compromised, and children break out in rashes that do not go away. For my relatives, sending their child abroad for high school is a matter of "saving her life."

When we look at the history of Chinese studying abroad after reform and opening, we can divide it into three basic periods. The first was from 1976 to 1992. At the time, most students were sent by the state, and tended to be older and to study science and technology, doing M.A.'s and

especially Ph.D.'s. Doing an undergraduate degree abroad was unheard of. The overseas students had a strong value orientation, which was to go to the West to learn advanced technologies, ideas, systems, and management methods, all of which serve as models for a future China. The second period was from the 1990s until quite recently, and students were no longer sent by the state. These students went as individuals, were younger, and studied any number of disciplines, but to my mind, the most important change was that they no longer had a definite value orientation. There were two changes here: first, they did not necessarily return to China, and were not necessarily studying for reasons of patriotism; and second, they no longer thought that the West represented the future or served as a model. So, both the idea of serving the country and the idea of universal values began to waver, and students became more utilitarian and pragmatic. Recently things have become even more clear. No one believes any more that the American system is the model, but when you ask them why they want to go there, they say "of course we want to go! They have clear air, and green spaces, and work can be fun." This is what led me to think about the issue of "social reproduction," which in fact is an important political question. It does not look political at first glance, but politics grows out of it.

In addition, what I call the "Pacific paradox" also touches on changes in individual lives occurring with international mobility, which is something I got interested in early on. In the latter part of the 1990s, and especially after 2000, many people moved to the left politically after going abroad, which was a fairly widespread phenomenon. At the outset, this happened especially with people doing Ph.D.'s in the humanities, people as Wang Shaoguang* (b. 1953) and Gan Yang (b. 1953), two well-known scholars who identified with the New Left. This went against the expectations of people of my generation, so I started thinking about the phenomenon of studying abroad and its impact on social life. What is the "Pacific paradox?" Sino-American relations at the time were closer than ever in terms of social and economic interactions, but at the same time in terms of political ideology there was an unprecedented rupture. Now it's all clear. Lots of young Chinese went to America to study and came to feel that America represented no ultimate values, and instead felt that the Chinese system was quite good. But they still wanted to stay in the States, and all they talked about was the immigration lottery, which might give them a green card. When we watched "River Elegy" in 1989, rushing into the Pacific Ocean meant rushing into the future, and we

all felt that intellectuals would certainly Westernize, but now things had suddenly reversed themselves. These were our initial expectations because we felt that through ever closer contacts, we would understand the West and its logic ever better, which would lead us to embrace it. But looking at things now, while we got closer in terms of lifestyle, political antagonisms grew as well. This is the Pacific paradox.

This paradox also has to do with the emptying out of public spaces. The state became the only unit of collective imagination, and outside of the state, communities like neighborhoods and school friends have all withered away, and nothing is left but the two extremes: the world and the individual self. When something happened all of a sudden, and people needed a collective in which to ground their identity, all they could do was turn toward the state. Of course, the state also produced a lot of discourse that helped this along, making your embrace of the state seem natural. This produces a type of nationalism that is not based on nostalgia or imagination grounded in a romantic view of history, tradition, or civilization, but rather in an understanding of power relations in the world. In other words, it is a geopolitical nationalism. This kind of nationalism says, if the big players act like this, then we have to act like this too. Everything is a struggle over power and interests so the world becomes a battleground where countries fight over power.

Wu Qi: In your subsequent work on studying abroad, did you discover anything new, or learn anything more about mobility or social reproduction? Can you talk about some specific examples?

Xiang Biao: I can talk about the "ritual economy" a bit. While I was in Singapore, the Asian Development Bank sought me out. In 2004, they had a general idea that they should be not just a funding agency but also a knowledge agency, meaning that they would not only stimulate development through investment but would also promote high-end policy research and engage in intellectual aid. One of the topics they thought up was whether they could get Asian immigrants to come back, or if they could be induced to help their home countries develop even if they did not come back. Because I felt somewhat lonely writing my book, I was eager for some practical engagement, so I agreed to work on the topic. I was responsible for the Chinese case, and cooperated with the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, and studied the policies the Chinese government had put in place to try to induce Chinese students who had studied abroad to come back.

First, what was immediately obvious was that the government was not in fact encouraging people to come back permanently, and instead emphasized short-term visits to China, or even doing service to China without returning. There is a huge difference between "coming back to serve China" and "serving China without coming back." In 2001, authorities came up with the "dumbbell model," with one end of the weight inside China and one outside. At the time I thought this policy was innovative because they were promoting transnational thinking as a way to help China develop. Transnational and international are not the same thing. "International" refers to the links between two countries, and international trade, which is coordinated and controlled by sovereign nations, remains international no matter how big it gets. The relationship between a US company and a Chinese company is subject to the laws and policies of these two countries. "Transnational" refers to a space, or a set of activities, that transcends the realm controlled by sovereign countries. For example, Wenzhou people doing business in Europe have a relationship with Wenzhou, and with several countries, and are beyond the control of any one sovereign nation.

But I also found a paradox in the government's initiatives to try to get students to come back and set up a company. On the one hand, all of these projects put a lot of emphasis on economic rationality, saying how much the government would invest, that the students were coming back to promote economic development, and that the whole thing was a win–win. On the other hand, there was a pronounced ritual element in how they actually did this, how they gave out the money, and how they told the students what the government wanted them to do. For example, if all they wanted was economic cooperation, then they would simply talk about the project and that would be it. So why bring all the participants together and hold a big meeting and a "signing ceremony?" These are big meetings and a lot of money goes down the drain. The event itself is highly ritualized, very emotional, and ideological, using language like "motherland," "love", and "sacrifice" in the speeches. So I call these initiatives "ritual economy" since it combines the two. This concept has at least two meanings. The first is that the state invests a lot of money in this ritual, which means there exists a concrete "ritual economy." Second, what really makes the ritual convincing is the economist logic, namely that everyone is working for their own economic interests, and only economically win–win relations are realistic and sustainable. So the ritual celebrates and reinforces such economic thinking.

We can also flip this over, and talk about an economic ritual instead of a ritual economy. This is about how the state uses rituals to redefine its relationships with the world. The state essentializes and ritualizes economic rationality. It says that the Chinese government is solely concerned about the economy and about development, which means that it is progressive and pragmatic and that elites from all walks of life should support it. The function of ritual is to make this focus on the economy seem natural, so that it truly enters into your subconscious, and is not something you think about. So no matter what your political attitude is, the economic ritual ropes everyone in.

Later on, at Oxford I had a lot of contact with Chinese students, and I noticed something interesting, which was another paradox, which is the existence of intermediaries. In theory, such intermediaries need not exist. Universities are eager to attract foreign students, they put their regulations and application procedures on their websites, and explain everything very clearly. Those who are applying are all educated, and their friends and classmates are all studying abroad. There is no information asymmetry.

So why do you need intermediaries? First, the universities have their reasons. For example, National University of Singapore prefers to hire intermediaries to recruit students, because these intermediaries can handle a large number of applications, know the basic procedures of the college entrance examination in China or India and the situation of high schools, and can act as a filter to ensure that the school recruits the best students. From the students' perspective, the role of the intermediary is in fact to help analyze the future employment situation, helping to decide where returns will be the highest in their particular case, and what school and major they should choose. So on the one hand, intermediaries promote global student mobility, and at the same time are also shaping and maintaining a certain hierarchical relationship—what kind of universities recruit what kinds of students, what kind of investment gets what kind of return. The reason that university rankings have become so important is that they give some information on return on investment. So here, the intermediaries are not dealing with problems of information asymmetry, or bringing supply and demand together and creating a market, but are instead structuring the market.

Here we see the relationship between studying abroad and social differentiation. Studying abroad transnationalizes the process of social differentiation. When the competition over differentiation reaches a peak within a country, then it spills over to the outside. If you can't make

it in China, then you try your luck abroad. In spatial terms, things move from domestic to international, and in terms of capital, the change is from financial resources to cultural or symbolic capital. The role of cultural or symbolic capital in sustaining financial or economic capital across generations is critical. This is how inequality gets locked in.

Wu Qi: I haven't read much of this research in China, and you haven't talked all that much about it. Will you talk about it in academic papers or at conferences?

Xiang Biao: I don't know yet. This might wind up being a collective project, where I invite specialists from different fields to join in. It will need robust conceptualization so that we can see if what we learned from student mobility can be applied to migration related to health care and tourism. We need to relate the detailed information to basic questions such as those about values and hierarchy, then we will see whether it can be applied to other cases.

Wu Qi: I see from your explanation that in your research you regard mobility related to "social reproduction" as an overall trend, under which different case studies converge. This is not like *Zhejiang Village* where one case study opened up a different topic. So what you are doing now, in terms of its difficulty and approach, appears to mark a new period of your work. What first caught your interest and pushed you in this direction?

Xiang Biao: I think it probably has something to do with my time in Singapore. I had a lot of colleagues in Singapore who were working on foreign domestic care workers. The commoditization of care was a big topic at the time, which touched on gender issues because most domestic workers were female. There is also the issue about the relation between public and private, because these workers were not coming into an organized enterprise, but instead someone's private space, working in someone else's home. So a lot of research examined domestic workers' individual experiences. But my feeling was that the global mobility of care workers represented a broader process of economic reorganization. Now everyone is aware of immaterial labor, such as IT, design, service, etc. Maybe we could put all this together to see whether there is something bigger behind it.

Transnational marriage is another example. In relatively developed countries, including China, "leftover women" are "high-status women," women with Ph.D.'s, female white-collar workers or even female entrepreneurs, while "leftover men" are "low-status men." Low-status men in cities marry women from rural villages, and low-status men

in villages marry women from underdeveloped countries. For example, Japanese men marry Chinese women, South Korean men marry Vietnamese women, and Chinese men are now marrying Burmese and Vietnamese women. What existing research has focused on is what we call the commoditization of transnational marriage. People are worried that a human relationship as basic as marriage has become something that could be bought and sold. There are intermediaries who organize groups of men to go overseas to select brides, and the women line up to be chosen by their future husbands. A lot of people feel that this is hard to accept. But I wanted to ask the opposite question, which was, if getting married is so hard, then why not stay single? Why is marriage so important that we have commoditized it? Maybe commoditization fetishizes marriage instead of degrading it. Behind transnational marriage is a conviction that marriage is so important that one cannot question it. Transnational marriage is an important process of social reproduction, and it reproduces not only individuals but also nations. According to conservatives, only if people get married and have children will we have the next generation, and only in this way will civilization be carried forward. So there is always this kind of dialectic behind transnational mobility and social reproduction. Mobility, accelerated mobility, does not only stimulate changes but can also consolidate existing inequalities and norms.

The Paradox of Class Mobility

Wu Qi: You talked about examples of transnational mobility like studying abroad or marriage, which for the most part is about horizontal mobility, but you also mentioned various vertical processes like social differentiation, class, and equality, which are in a dialectical relationship with horizontal mobility. Can you unpack this dialectical relationship a bit, and explain in concrete terms how this makes things worse, particularly in the specific context of China? In other words, is vertical class mobility something you are concerned with?

Xiang Biao: The relationship between horizontal spacial mobility and vertical hierarchies is probably more complicated than the way we usually depict it. In the early period of reform and opening, the system was already hierarchical; there were those inside the system and those outside the system, and there were differences between officials, cadres, peasants, etc., there is no doubt about all this. But for the vast majority of people, the resources they possessed were more or less equal, and there was a strong sense of equality. With reform and opening, social differentiation increased, and there are four points that stand out.

First is that, for the moment, most people have experienced upward mobility, because the overall size of the economy is still expanding. We can also divide this process into two stages. One is straightforward upward mobility, which came with the agricultural reforms from the 1980s through the mid-1990s. During this period, everyone's standard of living moved directly upward, and the reforms received a lot

of popular support. Second, the period from the 1990s down to the present, which the sociologist Sun Liping described as a "fracturing," where a gap appeared between those who have money and those who don't. But people were generally okay with that, as everyone's life was still improving. A couple of new growth engines, like Internet technology and the service industry, developed rapidly, and everyone had the feeling that a rising tide lifts all boats. For example, when Didi, China's Uber, and bicycle-sharing services first came on the market, they spent a lot of money to win over consumers, and the common people had the happy feeling of "following along."

The second point that stands out is that China's social differentiation is a participatory competition involving everyone. This is related to the legacy of the early period of socialism. At the beginning of reform and opening, everyone had more or less the same resources, and reform and opening was inclusive, which meant that a billion people were pushed into market competition at more or less the same time. Everyone felt that they had the right to benefit in this process, and all tried to stay a step ahead of their neighbor and were afraid of being left behind, which created a strong mentality of not wanting to miss the bus. Every opportunity that slipped by might well be the last opportunity. This kind of mass participatory differentiation is unlike the rigid hierarchy we find in India, nor is it like what modern Western scholarship focuses on as the main problems of the day: exclusion, expulsion, marginalization, and direct oppression. Chinese people don't have this feeling. They feel like they have to run fast, but if they fall behind, it is their responsibility. They don't feel that they have been excluded. In some ways, it might have been healthier if they had been excluded, because this might have produced a new sense of self, which would come with a new set of actions. People might resist, or they might carve out a new path. But precisely because they feel like they are still in the game, and can still keep playing, they actively participate, and this is the second point.

Third, vertical differentiation is tied together with horizontal mobility. Once the masses participate in competitive mobility, some strive for international mobility in order to gain extra advantages. Those at the top send their capital abroad to preserve their position; those in the middle and at the bottom, like peasants, may go to Singapore or Japan for work; the urban middle classes send their children abroad to study.

We already talked about the fourth point, which is that this differentiation is not reflected in how we talk, or in cultural matters. Although we all

know that there are inequalities between the rich and the poor, everyone nonetheless watches the same entertainment and speaks the same way.

Only when people have different ways of expressing themselves and different lifestyles does the meaning of inequality come into focus, at which point it is easier to come up with remedies or means to resist. Britain is like this. The British working class has a strong identity and does not want to hang around with intellectuals. Some people say they are shooting themselves in the foot, and keeping their children from ascending to the middle class. But because they have a clear understanding of their own distinctive lifestyle and develop their own artistic expression, they have the strength to contest the higher class, and they often hold their own and protect their interests through public policy. This is an interesting strategy: I want to protect myself, which does not mean that I want to surpass you, but rather test myself against you. Of course, such a strategy has limited effectiveness in practice now, largely because of globalization and the emergence of a global elite, which means that the working class has a hard time identifying its enemy, and at the same time the economic production and foundation of the working class are too diminished.

Wu Qi: Are all of these characteristics related to the timing of reform and opening? Because the most important developed countries have entered a new stage in the development of capitalism, which some scholars call late capitalism, while China remains in the primary stage of socialism, and at the same time, the explosion in technology and entertainment has been global and has spread throughout the world rapidly, creating the overlapping complexity of vertical and horizontal mobility. Do you feel like this is unique to China? In other words, is this something new in history?

Xiang Biao: I'm not sure whether this is something new in history. But what has happened in China, where a huge population is trying to change its destiny, is not something that happens often. The global perspective you mentioned is important. In terms of technology, information, and entertainment, we truly have entered the age of the global village; in terms of the economy and the distribution of wealth, the world is a battlefield; in terms of politics and ideology, it's fragmented and antagonistic. We might see this as an extension of the "Pacific paradox."

Wu Qi: You mentioned in your lecture at Tsinghua that there is a gap between China's rise as an economic fact and as social consciousness. Can we understand this gap by looking at the idea of "social reproduction?"

Xiang Biao: We might say that China's economic growth was truly an expression of materialism because we basically relied on material production to realize rapid growth, and the price we paid for that was that we paid little attention to "social reproduction." I'll give you an example. I met a taxi driver who works two shifts, and I asked him if he wasn't tired, and how his health was. He said: "Health? Health comes later." Here we see the price paid by ignoring "social reproduction" and pursuing high-speed growth. Many people tell me I'm too idealistic, and that if people were not pushing for rapid growth, then the material needs of young people would not be met, and there would be lots of unemployment, lots of poverty, and many more problems. This seems truer than it is. Given the overall economic production of present-day China, if we were to carry out a thorough redistribution, we could solve all of these problems, because we have enough for everyone to live well. But now it is like we have chosen our path, and have to grow faster and become stronger, precisely because we have no desire to go through some radical redistribution. But if we want those who are doing well to do still better, and at the same time pull up those who are trailing behind, this is really quite difficult, and at some future point, we might have to take the path of redistribution.

This in turn relates to the idea of "possession." "This is money that I have made with my own two hands, so how dare you redistribute it?!" Here, anthropology has something to say. We talked about the collective life we knew when we were young. At that time, the idea of possession was quite weak and people understood the need to share. The idea of "possession" slowly flourished during reform and opening, when everyone became preoccupied with personal gains and losses. At present, "possession" has become an important life goal, something that is worth studying, because the idea is not particularly strong in the Chinese tradition. The most important resource surely used to be the land, and land rights were divided into surface and subsoil rights, land ownership changed hands a lot, most of the time the landlords did not own that much land, wealth only lasted for three generations which meant it alternated among various families, and lineages had ritual fields set aside to help the poor. In the expression we now use for "possession"—zhanyou*—there is a certain antagonism between zhan, which means seizing or occupying, and you, which means to have and to use. If you live in your house, you "have" it; if you buy a lot of houses and charge expensive rent and make a lot of money, then you have "seized" it. You is legitimate and zhan is frowned upon, but the two are now mixed up.

Looking for a New Discourse

Wu Qi: When you talk about the situation of class mobility and universal feelings about life, I think most readers can empathize, but they still lack the tools or the framework to understand them. In the context of the late 1990s or early 2000s, there was a discussion about left and right, and both sides had specific ideas in their description of China and the reasons for this description. For example, the left argued that the problem had to do with the huge capitalist system, while the right talked about the corruption of power itself. But now, a big problem is that, first, this antagonism is gradually disappearing, and second, perhaps because it is disappearing, public discourse itself is also disappearing, and not responding to everyone's true experiences and feelings, so there is a prevailing sense of not knowing what to do. On the one hand, everybody feels like their lives are really changing, sometimes in positive ways, but at the same time, they feel like it's not enough. They don't know how to understand it, and they don't know what to resist, so they decide not to worry about it too much and just get on with life, with is after all fairly comfortable.

    Xiang Biao: You're right. There are times when things are going well, and yet the anxiety does not really go away. The pressure from work, from your mortgage, from your kids' education is still there, and you feel like you have to work hard, but everyone feels like this pressure is nobody's fault, and they just keep pushing. I completely agree with your analysis, and in the intellectual scene in China today, there are still debates over

specific issues, but the big divisions that once existed are no longer there, which forces us to look for a new discourse to describe today's situation.

Today, the question of lifestyle is as important as capital and state power. It is really difficult at the present moment to state clearly what the relationship between capital and labor is, or the relationship between the state and citizens, or even your relationship with yourself, because everything is blended together in your lifestyle. If we try to look at things from the perspective of class or labor it is hard to see things accurately, and it's better to look at lifestyle or entertainment. And when we do this kind of cultural analysis, we can't do like we used to and treat culture as a variable. The reason why we need cultural analysis is in fact because we want to foreground those whom we are analyzing, by which I mean the ordinary people, and especially young people, as leading thinking subjects.

Wu Qi: The viewpoints that come out of your research on these subjects are quite vivid, with implicit value judgments, but the judgments are not expressed as commentary, and instead emerge from careful attention to detail. How did you go about thinking about them? Was it that from the outset you did not focus on viewpoints or where your feelings were taking you, and just went ahead with your description, or had you already internalized the kind of intellectual concerns that we criticized earlier on so that they surfaced later on in the description?

Xiang Biao: Objectively speaking, I think it was the latter. I have been programmed, too, and have definitely been influenced by intellectual trends. When I am looking at a specific problem, my two most important interests are probably, first, I want to see the inner contradictions. Nothing develops totally smoothly, and there are always opposing forces pushing in different directions, and you have to understand who won and who lost. Second, I like to paint the overall picture, and I feel like valuable work should draw a map for the reader, and provide a sense of direction.

For example, I have recently been thinking about "logistical power." Mobility is an important part of social change in China. In the past, most of China's social organization was based on immobility. People did not change jobs, they did not move, and all material resources were allocated by the plan. After reform and opening, beginning in the villages, people started to move around, things started to move around, and so in the early 1990s, Sun Liping pointed out that the "free movement of resources" and a "free space for activities" had become basic elements in China's social change. The basic understanding at the time was that power used to be sustained by immobility, and now that the free space

for movement had grown, the things that power could control directly would diminish. So at the time, Sun Liping's prediction was that people would increasingly obtain life resources and development opportunities from an autonomous "society," a civil society would gradually emerge, and the power of the state would weaken. But what do we see now? Mobility is absolutely increasing, but state power is clearly stronger as well. So something I want to understand is how this big picture evolved. The idea behind "logistical power" is that at present a kind of power based on logistics is being created, a kind of power that does not try to control mobility, but instead takes mobility as its foundation.

The idea of the "normalized entanglements" gets at something similar. Daily life in China is increasingly normalized. It used to be a real pain to buy a train ticket, and there were scalpers and all that, but that's gone now. And things are cleaner and more orderly than they used to be, but this sense of order has not brought people a sense of calm, and instead, their feelings of insecurity have increased. How do we explain this contradiction?

Raising these questions is perhaps related to intellectuals' concerns, and if it is, then I admit that it is a limitation. Not that having a concern is a limitation, but it means that my thought has been programmed, and always goes in a certain direction. Readers may think that this is simply a matter of having a consistent *problématique*, but I don't aim for consistency, and to my mind, it is more a matter of a lack of imagination or a lack of understanding of the richness of practice.

Wu Qi: If we set aside the historical role of intellectuals and talk specifically about some of their qualities or concerns, do you see anything there that is positive and should not be abandoned? Some people see these concerns as common sense that should be protected, or as moral principles, which should be a beacon, leading us forward. Although you describe the consistency of intellectuals as a limitation, on the other hand, it is natural to want to be consistent. Is there something here that we should keep or maybe even learn from?

Xiang Biao: What is the most important intellectual temperament or trait? As a profession, or as a group, intellectuals may disappear someday, as everyone can become an intellectual. At that point, what distinguishes an intellectual from everyone else? To my mind, it is the capacity to reflect. This capacity is a new thing because the goal of traditional intellectuals was not to reflect on things, but instead to explain or interpret things that were already known, providing everyone with a kind of order

and worldview. The idea of reflecting was popularized by the Frankfurt School, which itself is quite modern, and what they said was that people don't need intellectuals to interpret the order of the world—what we need instead is for people to criticize that basic world order. This is badly needed. Because nowadays the basic mission every day for most people is just to get through that day, and once that mission is completed, they still have to keep moving forward. The meaning of reflection is that I want to stop myself, hold myself back, and not keep moving forward in the same direction. I want to think about why I'm doing what I'm doing today and wonder whether I can't do it in some other way.

Actually, what intellectuals give us is just a lifestyle. Everyone has their lifestyle: Daoists live like Daoists, and financial directors live like financial directors. The main point of an intellectual's lifestyle is analysis and reflection. Reflecting means asking questions, why are things this way and why can't they be that way. The questions must be asked with a certain logic, based on comparisons that come out of observing reality. This is not necessarily driven by a sense of responsibility for other people, or a sense of community responsibility, but is a self-reflection, or a reflection on things at hand. In fact the community tradition is much stronger in non-intellectual circles. Peasants and workers, including people working in offices, have a strong sense of community even if their level of knowledge is relatively low because they are working together in the same physical space. Intellectuals are quite selfish, with a strong sense of individuality, but this historical limitation may make an intellectual lifestyle more appropriate for young people in the present era since individualism is quite a strong trend among young people as well.

We have talked about intellectuals a lot today, but I have never understood the role I play in these terms, and have never seen this book as something to be read by intellectuals. But intellectual discourse in China remains strong. For example, the discourse surrounding the spiritual independence of universities sometimes tends toward the worship of Western universities, which is not necessarily a good way to think. Western universities are more independent than ours, but we have to ask how they maintain this independence in daily practice. It has less to do with spirit than with method. On the other hand, it would not be hard to be independent in China, but the problem is that senior professors want to become officials, and once you are an official you have resources, and once you have resources you don't want to give up your position, and

that means you are no longer independent. But it is possible as an ordinary scholar to be independent, as long as you don't rebel and don't become an official. There is no need to make such a fuss about it.

Wu Qi: You have mentioned many times that the work of scholarship should be transformed to become a tool to help people understand problems. This includes your expectations of non-fiction writing and your hope that it can move into different realms, but I am always skeptical, or pessimistic. Most of what I see now is that people still live and pursue the original kind of academic life and the benefits it brings, they like living in an ivory tower and pronouncing on the state of the world, and few people have made a fundamental shift. What is your view? Has anyone responded to your call?

Xiang Biao: This is all pretty new. I think the strategy is simply to get started and then see how things go. Documentary drama, non-fiction writing, and migrant workers' literature are all new possibilities. For example, the 2000 play, *Che Guevara*, was no great artistic achievement, but this is not the way to look at it, because it had a great capacity to mobilize people, and was kind of an invitation. I think it would be possible to add more scholarly depth to that invitation. The academic system is not going to change overnight, and scholars have to publish and do all the stuff they have to do, but in their free time, they could still experiment in this way, working with artists and writers. For example, Internet novels can be commercialized, but anthropologists could get in there and ask some questions, or ask for contributions from the public to reflect on particular points. This may generate new discussions and make people think.

Wu Qi: This touches on a much larger question of the social position of scholars and even the social sciences as a whole, and may be part of a major shift in the humanities. Do you still emphasize the role of individual action in accomplishing this transformation?

Xiang Biao: You have to start with the individual. If you are always just calling on people to do something without showing them a sample of what you are talking about, people won't listen, so you have to start on a small scale. I think I'm more Wenzhou + Oxford, and that I'm not so Beida. Wenzhou people make lighters, and Oxford has its tradition of empiricism, in the eyes of which any kind of big talk is immediately suspect and everything is subject to empirical proof, with the emphasis on materiality, on how things work. Wenzhou people make lighters to sell them, and to sell them you have to show them to people. These

are important characteristics of anthropology. I have always believed that there are many ways to illustrate a theory. You have tightly structured, deductive theories, but you also have theories that draw pictures. Ethnography is the latter, built up stroke by stroke through the accumulation of countless details, like a huge fresco, which cannot be reduced to a conclusion. It's all about common sense, but what is interesting is to figure out what details stack up behind common sense. This is also the source of my optimism, that young people want to read texts that reveal such details, which is a perfectly reasonable request, which anthropologists should help to meet.

Anthropology as Intermediary

Wu Qi: Whenever you come back to China to lecture, or when you publish articles here, a lot of young readers are keenly interested, which is consistent with my own observations that young people are getting interested in anthropology in a way they have not been before. In the past, for example, when I was in university, politics, economics, law, journalism, and even history were more popular than sociology and anthropology, but in the past few years, it's like there's a new breeze blowing, and everyone is going abroad to study anthropology. The other disciplines seem like they are known parts of an existing structure, while anthropology, which used to be unpopular, offers a new space for imagination and praxis. Have you noticed this? Are you in contact with these young people who are so enthusiastic about anthropology? Have you discovered any changes?

Xiang Biao: People who study anthropology are interesting people, and a bit different from the rest, but, just like you said, these "oddballs" have become a small mainstream. In my view, the popularity of anthropology comes from people truly wanting to learn some mid-level analytic tools that are in direct relation to their experiences. If you just study the experience itself, this has an entertainment value and a comfort value, and it satisfies a certain emotional need, but things move on quickly, so it's like eating cold fast food. There's a market for big theories now, which also satisfy emotional needs, and a lot of big theories are aiming to stir people up. The kind of intellectual analysis that we need should have a direct and

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organic connection to people's experiences. Everyone wants to under-stand society, which naturally means that they first reach for studies they can understand. "Understanding" means recognizing something. When someone else says something that I understand, it means that I recognize that thing that might happen to me, therefore I immediately understand what the person I am talking to actually wants to say. Everyone is yearning for this kind of analysis.

But I still haven't seen younger colleagues using lively and passionate language in social analysis. When they are talking about it orally we find it interesting, but when they design their research they revert to the norm, and produce uninteresting, run-of-the-mill stuff. Even how they express their passion is kind of stilted, more like a religious search for meaning than a real engagement with social reality. Of course, the search for meaning is great, but it has to link up with the richness and complexity of reality, so there are a few more steps that younger colleagues need to take. This is where those of us who are a bit older might be of service.

Wu Qi: Where do you see this "service" being put to use? In teaching? Graduate training? Or maybe in other public activities and cultural exchanges? What else do you see?

Xiang Biao: I feel like supervision of dissertations is important, a sort of one-on-one education. It is also important to provide good examples. The skills we seek to develop are quite broad, which makes it hard to tell students exactly what to do, you can't just write it down in a "guide." Training this way of thinking and working, such as knowing where to enter a topic, how to find its richness, how to continually question oneself—is not something that can be taught solely through words and has to be developed through practice. Everyone has the latent capacity to do this, so it is not that the capacity has to be taught; it's the other way around, in the sense that you have to spot that capacity and tease it out. The first thing to do is to see ourselves as primary and secondary school teachers, or even kindergarten teachers, and learn how to put ourselves on the same level as our students. Then we have to dig in, learning their weaknesses, shortcomings, and enthusiasms, ultimately bringing a latent thinker to the surface. So you have to teach everyone differently. This is why thesis supervision is important because you wind up understanding the student fairly well and engaging in genuine exchange with them.

In addition, I think it is quite important to organize ad hoc small discussion groups to respond to contemporary issues, which may have nothing to do with dissertations or research topics. This helps keep our

thoughts engaged at all times, connected to social reality. All thought comes from experience, which seems to be a natural thing, but to do it right requires frequent training, to train the accuracy of your observations, the speed of your deductions, and your ability to see cracks or contradictions.

Wu Qi: That day when you gave a lecture at Tsinghua and talked with the M.A. and Ph.D. students, is that sort of interaction something you have less of at Oxford? It seemed like you and the students were both soaking it up and learning a lot. Was that a more or less ideal situation?

Xiang Biao: Your observation is absolutely correct, and it's the thing I like the best about China. The situation at Tsinghua is of course in large measure due to Wang Hui's work and the foundation he laid, which earned a lot of space and institutional support. I was also moved by the warmth of the students, which I really wasn't expecting, because the things I was talking about were rather narrow, and not the fate of the nation, but everyone was excited, which was encouraging.

But from another angle, I am always a bit anxious, because I feel like I should deliver solid research, and that writing interesting commentary is not enough. I should put out something with practical ramifications that people can go test or weigh its usefulness. This problem is partly because at present my world is quite fractured. The things I teach at Oxford have to do with China, but the approach is different.

For example, "infrastructuralization" means that Asian governments are increasingly investing in manpower training and other policies to provide a good environment for people to start businesses and increase income, that is, by providing various types of infrastructure, including hardware and software. However, simply having the infrastructure does not mean that people will actually set up businesses and increase their income. Infrastructuralization refers to this kind of development model: the government does not provide actual benefits but instead creates the conditions allowing the people to achieve those benefits themselves. This indeed is one generalization that we can make about development trends in Asia, but it seems like it doesn't go far enough. Another example is my concept of "would-be migrants." Current migration studies normally start with the moment of migration and treat the migrants' return to their home country or the time they spend waiting to migrate as side issues. In my view, we should turn things around, because, in many developing countries, waiting to leave the country seems to be a widespread experience, and has a direct impact on people's lives. Only a small number of

those waiting to migrate actually migrate, which is often due to random reasons as to why they succeeded and others didn't. What do you do while you wait, especially if you wind up waiting for years? So the focus of the analysis should not be the actual process of migration, but rather the process of waiting to migrate. This is what I talk about at Oxford, and it has no traction in political terms in Asia. I haven't yet found a solution to this.

Wu Qi: In our interview at Oxford, you talked about the writer's block that you experienced in the process of your transition between East and West, between your anthropological scholarship and your more politically oriented public engagement. Have you found a solution to this problem?

Xiang Biao: Not really. My guess is this is a common problem for many scholars, although it may be more acute in my case. This is because the M.A. program on migration that I'm in charge of is obviously influenced by the public concerns in the West, for example focusing on the refugee crisis, the social integration of immigrants, and the education of the second generation. But I am quite political, and emphasize local engagement, and I don't have a strong sense of local engagement with these issues, which creates a fair bit of tension. This also touches on how I currently understand the role of the social sciences and anthropology as intermediaries, that the first thing they should do is to serve as intermediaries between the actors and scholars of other disciplines. The second thing is to mediate between diverse ways of articulating meaning, including between social research and arts and humanities. The third, and perhaps the most important for me, is the mediation between local issues and global perspectives.

Any real problem is a local problem. One of our biggest problems now is that social research and analysis have become excessively globalized. The concepts and the theories used in journals and conferences are all the same, and it is not easy to express what the actual problems are. These theories all make good sense, but how do we grasp the true issues and convey the messages so that they will have power and punch? Locality is complicated, because not only do problems originate in a particular place but audiences are also localized and have their own understandings, which means that your narrative needs to be localized as well. To get a handle on a local problem, you need to keep a certain distance from global discourse, but at the same time you need to maintain a global vision, accurately locating the local problem on the larger map—this is the only way to arrive at a sure judgment. So, my feeling is that anthropology

should slowly come to play this kind of intermediary role, setting aside comparative research and first writing up our local settings, which will give everyone mutual reference points.

When we take each other as reference points, we need theory. We have talked about the relationship between theory and the mass line, and the idea of theory as intermediary is like Mao Zedong's theory of the mass line, where you start from the masses and return to the masses. In this kind of process, we need theory, because only theory can integrate disparate experiences, and can make the results of this integration interesting, organic, and useful so that they can return to the masses. Even more important is when things return to the masses, you need theory to explain why this experience can be useful, how you are meant to use it, and what future it will ultimately produce. The theory is meant to facilitate interaction.

The reason that thirteenth century Europe and especially fourteenth and fifteenth century Paris saw the birth of the modern university had a lot to do with population movement. Migration forces people to interact. One of my hypotheses is that mobility stimulated advancements in the development of abstract and empirical reasoning, because different people met together, and had to interact, compare local practices with practices from other places, explain why their ideas are not the same, and figure out how to reach an agreement, in the process of which, theory popped up. If we had remained in completely homogeneous, closed groups, we might not have needed theory to explain life, because religion, tradition, and norms might have been sufficient explanations. The point of talking about this hypothesis is to say that theory is interactive, and that theory is a kind of persuasion and a kind of mobilization. If there is no spirit of interaction, there is no real theory.

We talked about my life situation a few minutes ago, and from an optimistic point of view, we might also see it as a kind of mediation between local issues and global perspectives, a process that might produce the seeds of new theories. For example, when I talk about infrastructural power and infrastructuralization, it looks to be quite academic and global, but it can also help me understand local issues. The infrastructuralization model does not directly give you things, but rather helps you find a possibly existing job, trains you, and empowers you in this technical way. There are mobile phones and WeChat to make you feel connected to the outside world, without allowing you to organize yourselves. This is all about potentiality, in that these measures help you become

employable, entrepreneurial, and potentially wealthy, but the actual opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, and development may not necessarily increase in reality. The state's investment in development increases, but the actual welfare of the people may not. Who actually reaps the benefits of the potentiality is an interesting question.

Recently, I've been reading papers from some conferences in China, and it does seem that scholars on the left have as many problems as those on the right. These dogmatic denunciations of imperialism and of the West don't read like anything Chinese authors would write, because they are basically copying the left-wing in Europe and the United States, and vastly blowing it up, and it's a long way from the Chinese experience. It's a crude reductionism and a crude elitism at the same time, saying "you people are being manipulated, and I will reveal the truth to you." This kind of scholarship can in no way serve as an intermediary.

Wu Qi: That makes me think that there are a lot of scholars now whose fix on global issues boils down to one term—global neoliberalism—and they think that this explains everything. But is this kind of theoretical framework really enough? Do we need to find an alternative theory to describe it, or should we completely get rid of this idea?

Xiang Biao: My feeling is that we shouldn't use it. What is global neoliberalism? How do you understand this "global"? Nor is it clear what "neoliberalism" means. China has neoliberalism, and the United States has neoliberalism, but the two are so different that you wonder why we use the same word. It is clearly not accurate. Why is everyone still using it? One reason is to hold onto established discourse, allowing scholars to recognize one another, go to conferences and publish papers, even if regular people have no idea what they are talking about. This isn't really a question of scholarship or academics, but in fact, it is a question of practice, a question of power, or how academics play the game. In the academic game, most of us write articles for other scholars to read, and we are not writing to be recognized for what we are researching.

To my mind, the next move is not to look for a new model, because a new model will simply create new hegemonic discourses, which is pointless. What we should do is start with local problems. Having a global perspective does not mean having a ready-made global answer to every problem, but instead means focusing on diversity, doing what you can to inform yourself, looking at what China is doing, at what India is doing, and it doesn't matter how far you can proceed in one go because this is the work of a lifetime. So we're not looking for a replacement vision, and instead we need to move past this simplistic framework.

The Local Gentry: Once More with Feeling

Wu Qi: Being back in Wenzhou, we should talk about the local gentry again, since it was your experience of living here that is the source of your gentry spirit.

Xiang Biao: If the gentry spirit gives you a sense of autonomy, then what sustains the spirit itself? To my mind, it is an interest in the details of daily life. For example, in Wenzhou we talk about how to make a sponge cake and how to make fish balls, going step by step, spending a lot of time. This is the collective labor of the entire family during Spring Festival, as well as the local culture constructed over the centuries, in which people take great pleasure. In fact, this is something very valuable in China, namely, that every place is different. I am interested in folk culture.

Folk culture has been dying out as a field of study, but suddenly became one of the most profitable disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, because when you apply for World Heritage recognition, build museums, or promote local images, you need displays and justifications. I try to remain optimistic, thinking that this is a good thing, that using these resources to probe local culture is always better than nothing. The key is the next step. Scholars should adopt the spirit of *taijiquan*,*[1] in which "propensity" (*shi**) is the key. Wang Hui often says that propensity

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[1] Translator's note: Taiji or Tai chi (lit. "great pole") is a Chinese cosmological term for the "Supreme Ultimate" state of undifferentiated absolute and infinite potential, the oneness before duality, from which Yin and Yang originate. The well-known exercise

is a latent force that is uncertain. Conditions are always changing, and you have to follow the potential where it takes you. Now the question is how to turn the resource for folk culture research into something more than a museum display, turn it into a foundation for something. It should become a series of narratives, a strong sense of self-awareness, which, once articulated, allows you to feel grounded in this world, so that if you don't understand something from the outside, you have the courage to say that you don't understand it.

This kind of detailed observation, if practiced in an amplified way, is one way of giving life meaning, allowing you to feel that life is all the more interesting, and to avoid getting lost in life's flickering images. Why do some people make this kind of observation? Many people never bother to observe, but observing is the particular character of the gentry. One of the things the gentry used to do was to write local gazetteers, which prompted them to carry out this kind of observation. This goes back to the cultivation of learning, a certain curiosity about people and life, and constant questioning: observation becomes a pleasure in and of itself.

Humanities education should start with this. What we call knowledge means having a well-grounded understanding of what is happening in the world, and on that basis, to observe, to let your observations settle in, and ultimately to build your own foundation.

Wu Qi: You mentioned earlier that your uncle had a great impact on you, and when I met him in Wenzhou this time, he turned out to be a Wenzhou expert, who seemed to know how everything works in Wenzhou, and he stands out as a concrete example of the local gentry. In fact, China has always had many such people, found in all walks of life. It's not easy to come up with a unified definition of them, but they know a little bit about everything, and can talk about things in an interesting way, in a way that reveals the many textures and levels of social life.

Xiang Biao: This idea of texture is important. We used to watch local propaganda documentaries about Wenzhou, which were completely over the top, and they would mention fish cakes, but there was no texture, so it was like explanations you read in a museum. The difference is subtle. Students can go to museums but not feel the texture of the objects, not to mention their underlying spirit, because museums have a preconceived narrative framework. My emphasis on empirical evidence is typical of

practices (*quan* = boxing), consisting of changing patterns of often very slow movements, adopt the concept to the human body and its relations to the cosmos.

empiricism, the idea that all truth comes from things that have happened. This is obviously philosophically untenable, because what happens in your head has also happened, but external things cannot be so readily shrugged off. The specifics of a fish cake are important and you cannot lightly "conceptualize" it by saying that it is a "symbol of Wenzhou," and so on. You have to know how it is made in the physical sense to grasp its underlying spirit.

Wu Qi: Your uncle's expressions were also very vivid, all very colloquial, and all grounded in something specific, such as a family member, or a dish at the dinner table, which led him immediately to a story or to something in his network of local knowledge. I can feel the influence of this kind of description on your work and your way of thinking, and I think we will need a lot of training if we want to master this kind of description.

Xiang Biao: It's very difficult. With my students at Oxford, my goal is to get them to have a clear vision of what is going on around them, out of which develops a clear vision of their research project, because this is what empirical work really is. When he was young, my uncle did processing work for other people. There were a lot of people in Wenzhou who would ask him to build one part of some production process they needed, so he bought a precision machine and set it up in his kitchen, where he worked with my aunt. He learned an incredible amount and constantly observed life in its most minute details. My mother said that when he was a child, he could never finish cleaning the windows because he was using newspaper to clean the glass, as soon as he saw the words he would start to read. It's a pity that his education was interrupted; there are too many people like that in China.

Wu Qi: What was the most exciting for you, coming back to Wenzhou and seeing your family and classmates? Especially in comparison to Beijing.

Xiang Biao: It gives me the feeling of moving between different worlds, which in itself can serve as a reminder that the world is many different things. Another thing is that talking to my classmates and family reminds me to try to be more organic. In fact, I am a fairly nerdy person, although I try to speak in normal language. For example, at yesterday's class reunion, there were a lot of jokes about romantic and sexual relations, the kind of thing I don't hear very often as jokes and don't really know how to participate in. Being aware of this sort of thing is quite important for anthropologists because jokes like these make up a big part

of what daily communication is for everyday people, and romance and sex are a big part of life too. So for me, it is a reminder that I must remember that there are different ways of communicating.

This also makes me wonder why sexual relations have become this kind of teasing, an important part of what former classmates talk about. This may have something to do with age because Chinese people in their 40s and 50s are already "degendered," or maybe they are "beyond gender," in the sense that their children are all grown, and they no longer talk about falling in love and things like that, but at the same time they may also be a little nostalgic for their youth.

In addition, this also has to do with our perception of sexual relations, and gender relations. In the West, for example, these jokes would be unthinkable in middle-class groups like my former classmates, especially when men and women are both present. If you make this kind of dirty joke with a Westerner, like someone is making out with someone, they at first think you are talking about something factual and may freak out. When you tell them, don't worry, it's just a joke, they don't get it, because they don't see anything funny. For Chinese people, however, there is a sense of liberation, which within the group may create a sense of intimacy, so it's interesting. This kind of joke is also quite rare in India and Japan, also it depends on specific social circles. This in turn is related to the understanding of gender relations. At Chinese class reunions, men and women are fairly equal in how much they talk and how much alcohol they drink, but women also generally accept specific gender roles and don't care about off-color jokes, and sometimes they even defend the mainstream gender roles.

Everyone is at the same time a young daughter-in-law and an old mother-in-law, living the life of the daughter-in-law and speaking the language of the mother-in-law.[2] Gender relations are both equal and unequal.

Wu Qi: On these kinds of social occasions, are you an active participant or more of a spectator? Is there any social pressure to join in?

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[2] Translator's note: The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is often depicted as the most fraught of Chinese family relations. The daughter-in-law marries in from the outside, and has to knuckle under to the mother-in-law, who is often a very powerful household leader. At the same time, the daughter-in-law is now inserting herself between son and mother, and as she bears children is on her way to becoming a mother-in-law herself.

Xiang Biao: I do my best to stay on the sidelines and laugh. Of course, since I've come back from abroad for the dinner, I was a special guest, so I won't be left out, but I don't participate all that much. It is quite important to directly perceive what this social scene is like. There is no pressure, and it's a good opportunity for me to observe. My ability to integrate into a group has declined in recent years, probably due to issues of energy, because it requires a lot of energy. In this respect, I was lucky that I was not born into a high-class intellectual family, which can be quite closed, in the sense that their friends and colleagues are probably all high-class intellectuals, so my ability to interact with larger, more diverse groups would be even worse.

Sometimes, these kinds of exchanges give me interesting ideas. Yesterday at dinner, we were discussing whether to send our children abroad to study. One classmate said that someone had recently posted a post to the classmates' Internet chat group, saying that the children should go abroad, but they should have a serious girlfriend or boyfriend before going abroad because then the parents would know that he or she was "normal," and they won't have to worry that the children would "become" homosexual overseas. The discussion is directly related to my topic "social reproduction," and to the connection between mobility and conservatism that we talked about earlier.

Wu Qi: So this becomes new material for research.

Xiang Biao: It was more of a learning experience than a data-gathering occasion. You have to understand what is "reasonable" for each person. I think this kind of socialization is more interesting than when you hang out with people like yourself. It can be a little uncomfortable, but it is interesting because it is more stimulating. Communication among intellectuals is more about self- and mutual recognition, so it's not that different from a panel discussion.

I have an aunt who used to work in a school-run factory and then went to a leather buying station in a county town, and then opened a noodle shop, where she worked for a long time, and she sometimes inspires me. Frank Dikötter (b. 1959), a scholar who works on modern Chinese history, has talked about documents he found revealing how much beef, rice, and tea Communist cadres consumed at meetings during the famines created by the Great Leap Forward. At dinner, my aunt's husband said that in the past they didn't have enough to eat, and said that it didn't make sense that the peasants who cultivated the land couldn't get enough to eat, and my first reaction was to talk about Dikötter's research, and

how much was taken by officials, which we now know from archival materials. My aunt immediately said: they didn't eat it, they took it home. This was a completely intuitive response, and contains two messages: first, she did not question the relationship between forced grain procurement and the famine; second, she did not think like scholars did, i.e., that these cadres were corrupt and greedy and ate their fill, but in fact, they probably wrapped the food up carefully and took it home. This is also a kind of redistribution, extracting it from the bottom, redistributing it at the top, then redistributing it within the cadres' families. This is not the same as the wasteful behavior I originally imagined during the meetings, based on Dikötter's finding. I think my aunt's judgment is probably spot on, that at that time it was impossible to waste things, nor could they stuff their mouths and splurge in this way, and we might see it as a bottom-up redistribution, or a reverse redistribution. My aunt's insight instantly brings out the richness of how the system functions.

This kind of patient and relaxed approach to daily life is not felt in Beijing. Beijing is a big city and no matter who you talk to, everyone talks the same way. Wenzhou is different, and the Wenzhou dialect is strange to start with, much of which cannot be directly translated into Mandarin, which may help people to think relatively independently. Another thing is that Wenzhou has a sense of distance from the system. Without this sense of distance, it is too easy to either defend the system or to go to the other extreme and imagine the cadres during the Great Leap Forward as being as greedy as wild animals. The sense of distance creates accuracy.

GLOSSARY

Accepting fate without giving up 认命不认输
Appreciation of Masterpieces《佳作欣赏》
Banyuetan《半月谈》
Beida 北大
Beiyang militarist 北洋军阀
Center for Research on the Chinese Economy 中国经济研究中心
chaxugeju (differential mode of association) 差序格局
Chen Yueguang 陈越光
Chen Kuan-Hsing 陈光兴
Chen Yun 陈云
China on the Edge《山坳上的中国》
Chinese Peasants《中国农民》
crisis consciousness 危机意识
Cultural Revolution 文化大革命
Dai Jinhua 戴锦华
danwei 单位
Deng Xiaoping 邓小平
diaosi 屌丝
Didi 滴滴
Dong Furen 董辅礽
Drifting with the Beggars' Gang《丐帮漂流记》
Du Ying 杜鹰
Fan Gang 樊纲

Fei Xiaotong 费孝通
Fan Yusu 范雨素
gaitu guiliu 改土归流
Gan Yang 甘阳
Gao Jianguo 高建国
Gao Pingzi 高平子
Gazetteer 地方志
Guo Yujie 郭玉洁
Great Leap Forward 大跃进
great unity 大一统
He Bochuan 何博传
Hu Feng 胡风
Hu Shi 胡适
Huang Jisu 黄纪苏
hukou (household registration system) 户口
Indentured Workers《包身工》
jia (false) 假
Jia Lusheng 贾鲁生
Jin Guantao 金观涛
Li Kang 李康
Li Meng 李猛
Li Siguang 李四光
Liang Shuming 梁漱溟
Lin, Justin Yifu 林毅夫
Liu Qingfeng 刘青峰
Liu Shiding 刘世定
Liu Zaifu 刘再复
Lü Xinyu 吕新雨
Lu Xun 鲁迅
Luo Danni 罗丹妮
Mao Zedong 毛泽东
mass line 群众路线
Minzu University of China 中央民族大学
national studies 国学
Northern Expedition 北伐
Peking University 北京大学
Peng Pai 彭湃
private plot 自留地
Qian Gang 钱钢

Qian Liqun 钱理群
Qin Hui 秦晖
qiuji (right to exist on the planet) 球籍
River Elegy《河殇》
root culture 乡土文化
shangfang 上访
Shen Honglie 沈鸿烈
shengnü 剩女
Shenzhen Special Zone News《深圳特区报》
Shi (Propensity) 势
shi (real) 实
Sun Liping 孙立平
Sun Yat-sen 孙中山
Sun Yirang 孙诒让
suspension 悬浮
suzhi 素质
Szeto Wah 司徒华
Taijiquan 太极拳
Takeuchi Yoshimi 竹内好
The Dream of the Red Chamber《红楼梦》
tianxia 天下
Tong Dalin 童大林
Toward the Future (book series) 走向未来 (丛书)
Tsinghua University 清华
tuantigeju (organizational mode of association) 团体格局
Uniting the Three Traditions《通三统》
Wang Hansheng 王汉生
Wang Hui 汪晖
Wang Shaoguang 王绍光
Wang Sibin 王思斌
Wang Xiaoqiang 王小强
Wang Yuanhua 王元化
Weiming lake 未名湖
Wenhui Monthly《文汇月刊》
work hole 工作洞
World Economic Herald《世界经济导报》
Wu Qi 吴琦
Xia Yan 夏衍
Xiang Biao 项飙

xiangshen (gentry) 乡绅
xin qimeng (new Enlightenment) 新启蒙
xu (fake) 虚
Xu Bing 徐冰
Yu Changjiang 于长江
Yu Luojin 遇罗锦
Yuan Shikai 袁世凯
Zhang Jiasheng 张家声
Zhang Taiyan 章太炎
Zhang Zai 张载
zhanyou 占有
zhen **(true)** 真
Zheng He 郑和
Zheng Yefu 郑也夫
Zheng Zhenduo 郑振铎
Zhongshan University 中山大学
Zhou Enlai 周恩来
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zhua 抓
Zhu Ziqing 朱自清

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