


ARTICLE

From Christian Transcendence to the Maoist Sublime: Liu Xiaofeng, the Chinese Straussians, and the Conservative Revolt against Modernity

Hang Tu* 

Department of Chinese, National University of Singapore

*Corresponding author. E-mail: tuhang@nus.edu.sg

(Received 28 October 2019; revised 23 April 2020; accepted 2 June 2021)

Liu Xiaofeng (1956–) is best known today as the founder of the “Chinese Straussian School,” a conservative intellectual movement that advocated a quasi-theological form of political leadership in contemporary China. Little attention has been paid, however, to the intertwined relationship between Liu’s political authoritarianism and his meditation on religion. This article traces Liu’s lifelong search for a “religious consciousness” from his youthful yearnings for Christian redemption in the 1980s “New Enlightenment,” to the utter profanation of the sacred in his recent espousal of the Mao cult. I suggest that Liu’s conservative turn should not obscure the profound and troubling continuity between his earlier search for an “otherworldly” religious ethics and his later obsession with “this-worldly” political theology. By exploring the entanglement between revolution and religion throughout Liu’s zigzagging journey, this article considers Liu’s transition as part and parcel of a generational endeavor to come to terms with the “politico-theological” legacies of Mao’s revolution.

Introduction

Beginning in the 1990s, intellectuals in mainland China were drawn increasingly away from the ideal of liberal democracy and toward conservative cultural politics. During the 1980s, reformist intellectuals inaugurated a “New Enlightenment” movement to criticize Mao’s “ultraleftist” revolutionary practice and promoted a cosmopolitan cultural vision based upon Western ideals such as democracy and science. In the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, however, intellectual discourse underwent a thorough transformation from the consensus politics of the liberal reform to a renewed emphasis on the indigenous sources of modernization.¹ Within the orbit of elite politics, neoconservatism emerged as a loose right-wing faction to advocate a state-centered “realistic response” to the perceived failure of socialist ideology and the advance of Western hegemony. The authoritarian turn in politics inspired waves of conservative cultural practices that sought to rejuvenate Chinese tradition as a system of normative value in the post-Marxist public sphere.

¹See Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC, 2008), Chs. 1, 2.

Governmental elites, academicians, and public intellectuals adhering to this faction dismissed liberal democracy as a nihilistic, technocratic, and Eurocentric model incompatible with the Chinese cultural and political tradition. Moreover, the conservatives' suspicion of reason and progress has led to burgeoning discussions on the role of "religion" (宗教) in the post-secular world, including both New Confucianism and the Sino-Christian theology movement. They called for a new religious consciousness to embrace the transcendent, the mystical, and the sacred against the secular order envisioned by the liberals.

In this context, Liu Xiaofeng (1956–) emerged as a key figure in the conservative revolution of the post-Mao era, whose work encompasses aesthetics, theology, and political philosophy.² After studying German philosophy at Peking University in the early 1980s, Liu made his intellectual debut with a series of essays on German Romanticism. Liu was particularly well known for his scathing critique of the "this-worldly" orientation of Confucian ethics, which he derided as inferior to the "otherworldly" virtue of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Moreover, the young scholar was convinced that only an utterly transcendent God could "rescue" the Chinese from their misguided pursuit of Mao's atheistic revolution. Whereas liberal critics mobilized the May Fourth quest for "science" and "democracy" to uphold a normative program of secularization, Liu's promulgation of Christian transcendence revealed the insufficiency of secular humanism to provide an "ultimate value" for the postrevolutionary era. Subsequently, Liu's interpretation and translation of Christian theology played a decisive role in the formation of the Sino-Christian theology movement, a collective scholarly endeavor to promote a contextual-historicist approach to Christianity in mainland China and Hong Kong. Hence Liu was widely considered one of the most prominent "cultural Christians": those who actively participated in the scholastic discussions of Christian culture but refrained from church associations. A theological passion for "ultimacy" beyond secular reason, Liu believed, would provide a robust moral grounding in the post-Marxist public sphere.

By the end of the 1990s, however, Liu had gradually come to a radical conclusion that his quest for Christian transcendence beyond politics risked collapsing into secular liberalism, cordoning off religion within the sphere of private experience. He eventually discarded his earlier liberal Christian stance and turned to the conservative political theology of the German American classicist Leo Strauss (1899–1973) and the Weimar antiliberal legal theorist Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). The Schmitt–Strauss exchange on the theological basis of political authority provided the intellectual ammunition for Liu to reassert a "Confucian religion" (儒教) against the secular modernity of the West. The restoration of "Confucian antiquity," Liu declared, could provide a "sacred canopy" to guide moral conduct and national

²The term "conservative revolution" has been used to describe multiple intellectual trends throughout twentieth-century China, from the ascendancy of the right-wing movements under Chiang Kai-shek's Nanjing regime to the interplay between new authoritarianism and the cultural conservative redux in the post-Tiananmen era. I acknowledge the malleable and versatile nature of Chinese conservatism but emphasize that the rejection of secular liberalism lies at the heart of the conservative revival in contemporary China. For related works see Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2008), Ch. 3; Els van Dongen, *Realistic Revolution: Contesting Chinese History, Culture, and Politics after 1989* (Cambridge, 2019), 9; Brain Tsui, *China's Conservative Revolution* (New York, 2018).

politics in the post-secular era. During the first decade of the new millennium, partisans and devotees gravitated toward the circles of the “Chinese Straussians” then forming around Liu in Guangzhou and Beijing. The Straussian acolytes promoted classical learning, created elitist “liberal-arts” educational institutions, and waged cultural wars to eradicate the corrosive influence of Western liberal values lurking in Chinese academia and beyond. This conservative backlash assumed an authoritarian form in 2013, as Liu made a bold proposal to identify the “Confucian root” of the modern Chinese revolution and celebrated Mao as a “sage-king” and a “founding father” of the Chinese republic.

This article explores Liu’s intellectual transition from a passionate cultural Christian to a neoconservative guru. It also aims to make sense of the post-Mao intellectual debates on reason and religion as reflected in Liu’s zigzagging journey. How to understand Liu’s conservative turn after decades of devotion to Western and Chinese faith traditions? Extant scholarship, most of which focuses on Liu’s Straussian undertaking, describe Liu’s turn as a “regression” “break” or “intellectual betrayal.”³ Liberal critics poignantly asked, what could possibly have induced Liu to abandon the “unfinished project” of enlightenment and justify ancient and modern tyranny? Indeed, whereas the 1980s “New Enlightenment” was associated with a self-conscious break from the sublime myth of Mao’s revolution, the rightward turn of Liu and his many acolytes seemed to have confirmed the disheartening return of authoritarian politics. Nonetheless, this narrative has reduced Liu’s complex intellectual saga into a tale about the post-Mao liberalization trend and its collapse. The dichotomous reading has obscured the dynamic and conflictual movement of Liu’s life and writing across three periods of contemporary China: his formation as an educated youth in the Cultural Revolution, his search for ultimacy in the 1980s humanist trend, and the crystallization of his conservative thinking after the 1989 Tiananmen protests. Above all, it fails to see the profound and troubling affinity between Liu’s earlier religious consciousness and his later fascination with political authoritarianism.

By contrast, I contend that the entanglement between revolution and religion has been a sustained theme throughout Liu’s lifelong search for “ultimate values,” from his youthful yearnings for Christian transcendence to the utter profanation of the sacred in his recent espousal of the Mao cult. From this view, Liu’s earlier search for an “otherworldly” religious ethic is continuous with his later obsession with “this-worldly” political theology. By stressing continuity, I do not mean to deny all the radical twists and turns in Liu’s thinking. Rather, tracing the commonalities linking the seemingly incompatible phases of Liu’s journey reveals how his thirst for transcendence *beyond* politics paradoxically aroused the desire for an absolute

³For a critical rejoinder against Liu’s Straussian turn see Kai Marchal and Carl K. Y. Shaw, eds., *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the Chinese-Speaking World: Reorienting the Political* (Lanham, 2017); for a defense of Liu’s Straussian position see Xu Jian, ed., *Gujin zhizheng yu wenming zijue* (Quarrels between the Ancients and the Moderns) (Shanghai, 2010); also see Wang Tao, “Leo Strauss in China,” *Claremont Review of Books*, Spring 2012, at <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/leo-strauss-in-china> (accessed 30 April 2019); Zhang Xu, “Shitelaosi zai zhongguo” (Strauss in China), *Jishou University Journal* 24 (2003); Dongxian Jiang, “Searching for the Chinese Autonomy: Leo Strauss in the Chinese Context” (unpublished master’s thesis, Duke University, Durham, NC, 2014).++Note 3. Please supply page span for Zhang Xu.++

ground for politics. Moreover, it situates Liu's transition as part and parcel of a generational endeavor to come to terms with the "politico-theological" legacies of Mao's revolution. For many post-Mao thinkers, the question of Maoist political religiosity—the inscription of religious symbols, rituals, and values onto revolutionary politics—was one of the most troubling and yet enticing legacies of this revolution.⁴ Liu was convinced that Mao's quasi-religious utopianism was an appeal for sustained social cohesion and political legitimacy, and in his eyes the waning of socialism in the post-Mao era entailed disenchantment. Liu struggled to carve out a space for religion—first Christianity and then Confucianism—as an alternative to secular modernity. As one of those "educated youth" who emerged in the 1980s with idealistic passions only to be thwarted—or tempted—by the powerful attraction of political religiosity, Liu's dramatic (de)conversion serves as an excellent guide to explore the dilemma between modern rationalism and its theological discontents that confronted the post-Mao generation.

Admittedly, my proposition about the continuity of Liu's thinking will certainly incur objections. Not for nothing was Liu frequently criticized for propagating the thoughts of the most extreme minds—from Schmitt, the "crown jurist of the Third Reich," to Strauss, who refused to "crawl to the cross of liberalism";⁵ from Kang Youwei (1858–1927), who invested Confucianism with mystical foundations, to Mao, whose poetic imageries and political visions entailed enormous human suffering. The metamorphosis of Liu's tension-ridden *oeuvre* produced endless polemics. He was admired, denounced, and vilified as an antitraditionalist in the 1980s, an unorthodox Christian in the 1990s, a Straussian acolyte in the 2000s, and an unrepentant neofascist in the contemporary scene. Important as these criticisms have been, political moralizing threatens to turn a calibrated analysis of intellectuals in politics into a "politicized history of intellectuals."⁶ Hence Liu's political undertaking should not inhibit us from analyzing the development of his thought from within its own categories and systems. To the critics who might fault my immanent approach for "depoliticizing" Liu's thinking, I propose that that criticism benefits from "reading the idea against itself."⁷ A careful reconstruction of Liu's conceptual scheme will shed light on the incongruities of his thinking.

The immanent approach nevertheless raises the question of how to contextualize Liu's thinking within the post-Mao intellectual milieu. Notwithstanding the trademark Straussian animosity toward the public, Liu was intensely preoccupied with the manifold interactions between his philosophical claims and China's changing

⁴For a definition of political religiosity see Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton, 2006); for an analysis of the quasi-religious aspects of Mao's revolutionary politics see Vincent Gossart and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago, 2010), 187–90; also see Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁵Leo Strauss, "Letters to Karl Löwith," *Constellations* 16/1 (2009), 84.++Note 5. Please supply full page span. House style is to give full spans as well as numbers of pages of specific interest.++

⁶See Julian Bourg, "Blame It on Paris," *French Historical Studies* 35/1 (2012), 181.++Note 6. Please supply page span.++

⁷Confronting the scandal of Heidegger's Nazi past, Habermas had undertaken to "think with Heidegger against Heidegger," which separates the ideational significance of existential philosophy from its ideological applications. See Peter Gordon, "A Lion in Winter," *The Nation*, 13 Sept. 2016; John P. McCormick, *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* (Cambridge, 1999), 7–8.++Note 7. Please supply page span for Gordon.++

political dynamics, to the point of neurosis. Liu, after all, was not just an exegete, but also a supreme manipulator of intellectual politics, mixing aesthetic provocations and political metaphors with abstract philosophical treatises. To explain why Liu's conceptual elaboration was constantly informed by and informing political exigencies, I also look at how Liu responded to various post-Mao cultural and intellectual trends, from his deliberate turn away from liberal humanism in the 1980s to his sympathy toward the rising cultural conservatism in the post-Tiananmen era. Hence my purpose is not to produce a dichotomy of immanence versus contextualism.⁸ Rather, by tracing the inner movements of Liu's ideas and restoring his zigzagging course to the horizon of its original articulation, I seek to elucidate the deeply contradictory nature of Liu's thinking as a combination of metaphysical rumination and opportunistic intent, philosophical insight and political dogmatism, sincerity and hypocrisy.

Since Liu's two major interventions concerned Christianity and Confucianism, their place in contemporary Chinese intellectual discourse merits a preliminary review. The revival of multiple religions in the post-Mao era has created heated debates among Western scholars regarding modern China's "religious questions" (宗教問題)—the "mutual adaption of religion and the modern political and social framework of Chinese societies."⁹ Deng Xiaoping's policy of "opening and reform" that began in 1978 loosened state regulation on the Protestant church, which led to a surge in Christian adherents in the countryside during the 1980s and in urban centers from the 1990s onward. The Christian resurgence was accompanied by increased attention to Western theology from official church leaders, independent pastors, religious scholars, and public intellectuals.¹⁰ Extant scholarship identifies the writings of Liu Xiaofeng and his fellow cultural Christians (e.g. Yang Huilin and He Guanghu) as a secular academic discourse fundamentally different from church theology.¹¹ Instead of adhering to Christian rituals and doctrines, proponents of Sino-Christian theology focus on the moral and cultural value of Christianity for contemporary Chinese society.¹² In particular, Liu's unorthodox aversion to doctrinal theology stands out in the scope of religious studies. Liu's iconic status as the most representative cultural Christian has in fact obscured the underlying disagreements between him and the major motifs of

⁸I am inspired by Gordon's notion of "conceptual ramification," which describes the interaction between ideas and social context as the mediatory process through which concepts branch out into the historical world. See Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide* (Cambridge, 2010), 3–4; for a critical elaboration of contextualism see Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8/1 (1969), 3–53.

⁹Gossart and Palmer, *The Religious Question*, 2.

¹⁰Chloë Starr and Zhuo Xiping divide contemporary Chinese theological writings into three major clusters: official church theologies, academic theology, and house-church writings. See Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Heaven, 2016), 224–39; Zhuo Xiping, ed., *Christianity: Religious Studies in Contemporary China* (Leiden, 2013).

¹¹See Pan-Chiu Lai and Jason Lam, eds., *Sino-Christian Theology: A Theological qua Cultural Movement in Contemporary China* (Berlin, 2010); Yang Huilin and Daniel H. N. Yeung, eds., *Sino-Christian Studies in China* (Newcastle, 2006); also see Starr, *Chinese Theology*, Ch. 9.

¹²For representative works see He Guanghu, *He Guanghu zixuanji* (Selected Works of He Guanghu) (Guilin, 1999); Yang Huilin, *Zai wenzue yu shenxue de bianjie* (At the Boundary of Literature and Theology) (Shanghai, 2012).

Sino-Christian theology. As I will demonstrate, Liu's thirst for transcendence beyond historical reasoning, which was rooted in his training in German Romanticism, was fundamentally incompatible with the contextual-historicist underpinning of the Sino-Christian theology movement.

Meanwhile, Liu Xiaofeng's turn to "Confucian religion" went hand in hand with the nationalistic assertion of "mainland New Confucianism" (大陸新儒家) from the 2000s onward.¹³ The Confucian revival since the early 1990s was a complex phenomenon overdetermined by many factors, including the castigation of the May Fourth iconoclasm among Chinese intellectuals, the resurgence of "national learning," and the anti-Western mood sponsored by the party-state.¹⁴ In contrast to the reformist stance of overseas Confucians, mainland Confucians projected an aggressive vision of Confucianism as a "national religion" (國教) underpinned by exclusive doctrinal, spiritual, and political systems.¹⁵ Although many scholars attribute this trend to a xenophobic and authoritarian mentality, the proliferation of competing discourses on the role of Confucianism in the public and political spheres—from civil religion to constitutional political design—went beyond reactionary sentiments.¹⁶ In this context, Liu Xiaofeng's Straussian interpretation of Confucianism has been described as "speculative," lacking a clearly expressed theoretical basis in Confucian canon and practice. My study aims to situate Liu and mainland Confucians within a shared agenda to rejuvenate a muscular form of religious piety toward "Chinese antiquity"—a coherent system of Confucian scriptures, rituals, and mythologies. They both reserved particular ire for the secularist myopia of the May Fourth generation, which transformed Confucian literature from sacred "scripture" (經) to "history" (史) and "historical data" (史料), sowing the seeds of "nihilism and relativism."¹⁷ Above all, this concerted assault on the ideal of a

¹³The value of the category of "mainland Confucianism" remains controversial. For a summary of the debate see Stephen C. Angle, "The Adolescence of Mainland New Confucianism," *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 49/2 (2018), 83–99.

¹⁴For a comprehensive study of the Confucian revival in the Chinese and sinophone intellectual discourse see John Makeham, *Lost Soul: "Confucianism" in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); for the role of the developmental state in the Confucian revival see Arif Dirlik, "Confucius in the Borderlands: Globalization, the Developmental State, and the Reinvention of Confucianism," in Dirlik, *Culture and History of Postrevolutionary China: The Perspective of Global Modernity* (Hong Kong, 2011), 97–156; for a discussion of the revival of national learning see Axel Schneider, "Bridging the Gap: Attempts at Constructing a 'New' Historical-Cultural Identity in the People's Republic of China," *East Asian History* 22 (2001), 129–44.

¹⁵Proposals to enshrine Confucianism as a national religion dated back to Kang Youwei's creation of the Confucian Association (孔教會) in 1912. For a historical overview of Confucian religion see Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton, 2013); Yong Chen, *Confucianism as Religion: Controversies and Consequences* (Leiden, 2013).

¹⁶For representative works see Jiang Qing, *Zhengzhi ruxue* (Political Confucianism) (Beijing, 2003); Jiang, *A Confucian Constitutional Order* (Princeton, 2016); Chen Ming, "On Confucianism as a Civil Religion and Its Significance for Contemporary China," *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, vol. 44(2) (Jan. 2013), 76–88.

¹⁷For a study of the demise of Confucian canon and the emergence of modern historiography in the late Qing and the early Republican period see Chen Bisheng, *Jingxue de wanjie* (The Collapse of Confucian Classics) (Shanghai, 2014); Luo Zhitian *Guojia yu xueshu: qingjieminchu guanyu guoxue de sixianglunzheng* (Nation and Learning: Quarrels Concerning "National Studies" in Late Qing and Early Republican China) (Beijing, 2003).

wholly secularized society urges us to acknowledge that China's conservative trends are not simply an atavistic revolt against the West. Rather, the minds of Liu-like intellectuals have been consistently shaped by Western academic discourses, from the postcolonial "decentering" of the West to the postmodern "suspicious hermeneutic" toward reason and progress.

In the following, I will focus on the three main stages of Liu's intellectual development: early Romanticism in the 1980s, transitional Straussian conversions in the post-Tiananmen era, and finally Maoism at the turn of the millennium. Rather than imposing a reified metanarrative, I employ the term "stage" to describe the dialectic of continuity and transformation that shaped the journey of Liu's mind. At first, Liu prioritized Christian transcendence to refute the sublime myth of revolution. But he was soon caught up in the radical gulf that separates Chinese culture from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the second stage, the Straussian paradigm of "ancient versus modern" enabled Liu to overcome this culturalist dilemma by returning to a "Chinese antiquity." This reversal further led to the rise of a neoconservative agenda to revive China's cultural heritage against "nihilistic" modern values. In the third stage, Schmitt provided Liu's project with a model of intensity that evokes enmity. To invoke the Leviathan power of Mao and reject his modernist revolution, Liu finally proposed to refurbish a "Confucian Mao" through a conservative "transvaluation" of Maoist ideals. The evolution of Liu's thinking was overdetermined by the dynamic interplay between the inner movement of the concepts and Liu's strategic responses to changing external contexts. Each episode reveals how Liu's thirst for transcendence fueled his searches for ancient, medieval, and modern forms of divine nexus, and how these politico-theological doctrines in turn framed his changing visions of the Chinese political order in the post-Mao era.

Early Romanticism

Liu Xiaofeng was born in 1956 into a petty bourgeois family outside Chongqing, southwest China. There he grew up and experienced the heightened revolutionary passions and factional warfare in the initial days of the Cultural Revolution. Although Liu was too young to participate in the Red Guard movement, the bloodshed left a deep mark. Soon, under Mao's instruction to "rusticate" urban youths, Liu and his cohort were sent to labor in a nearby rural village after high school. In 1978, Liu resumed his education and enrolled as a German literature major at Sichuan Foreign Language University. In 1982, he moved from Chongqing to Beijing and studied German Romanticism at Peking University.

At the time, intellectual circles in Beijing were marked by boisterous crazes for a "New Enlightenment" to rebuild China's cultural and spiritual values. While humanist writers created "scar literature" to address human abuses and mass violence conducted in the name of a "holy revolution," reformist thinkers came to regard the religious aura of Maoism as remnants of "feudal traditions" and superstitions. Motivated by the humanists' call for a return to bourgeois normalcy, Liu penned elegant essays on Schelling and Schlegel, alongside critiques of revolutionary violence. Notably, the German Romantics' search for a "beautiful soul" inspired Liu to reclaim a refined bourgeois interiority. Liu conceived of the interior as the locus of authentic selfhood, a realm that nourishes transcendental beauty against

the degraded exteriority characterized by torture, deceit, and enmity. For Liu's cohort, bourgeois privacy was endowed with an emancipatory promise to break away from the tyranny of Maoist collectivism. But what distinguished Liu's tone from the naive optimism of other humanists was his gloomy vision of human finitude. For instance, he frequently invoked the term "the fragility of existence" to describe the individual's vulnerability to that which escapes and eludes human control. Here, Heidegger's evident influence was accompanied by a shocked awareness of the insufficiency of secular vocabularies to describe the violent apocalypse conjured by Mao's revolution. In Liu's perspective, mass atrocities of the Mao era nullify any possibilities of "humanity" "progress," and "liberation." By declaring that "idealism" could no longer be redeemed, Liu articulated an apocalyptic sensibility, indeed a yearning for a redemption that would only come through a divine being beyond human reason.

Soon, the split between Liu and the advocates of humanism began to take more concrete shape. Liu's thirst for transcendence beyond historical reasoning gradually drove him to embrace the transcendent God of the Bible as the true source of the sacred. Following the path of German Romantics, he came to realize that the bourgeois self was, after all, predicated on the archetypal divine person, a theological linkage between the infinite God and its incarnation in finite humanity. Christian transcendence points to an ultimate ground for human existence far beyond "flimsy" humanism. In 1988, Liu published his monograph *Salvation and Easiness* (拯救與逍遙), a bold call to cast off Sino-Western cultural differences in order to confront the more fundamental question of ultimate values. In a prefatory remark Liu refuted the predominant assumption shared by Chinese aestheticians since the May Fourth era that Confucian–Daoist aesthetics provide a unique spiritual ontology to overcome Western industrial modernity.¹⁸ In Liu's judgment, the May Fourth generation was naive to assume that a combination of Daoist naturalism and Confucian ethics could resolve the spiritual crisis of modernity. To mistake scientific rationality for Western modernity, Liu contended, was the cardinal error of this cultural nationalism that completely bypassed the Judeo-Christian tradition of the West. Most importantly, Liu believed that if transcendence is tethered to a specific cultural form, then ultimate value has ceased to be ultimate. On this view, fundamental values would seem to acquire a universal appeal beyond specific cultural forms. Liu suggested that if all human beings by their very nature thirst for ultimate meaning above culture, then the Confucian–Daoist tradition must emulate Christianity to point beyond secular moral cultivation and political ethics.

To explain the spiritual lacuna of the Confucian–Daoist tradition, Liu offered a seminal reading of the lyrics composed by Qu Yuan (c.340–278 BC)—the high minister of the southern kingdom Chu. After being deposed from his official post, Qu wrote sober and melancholic essays to reflect on his tortured partnership with the ill-fated Chu regime. Liu puzzled over Qu's enigmatic *Heavenly Questions* (天問), which comprises ontological questions concerning the origin of the cosmos and the mysteries of Heaven and Earth. He argued that Qu's quest for cosmological questions represents his utter despair over the Confucian ideal of benevolent rule.

¹⁸Liu Xiaofeng, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao* (Salvation and Easiness) (1988) (Shanghai, 2011).

Ideally, literati gain moral edification by serving under a virtuous and competent regime. Higher morality is attainable only by providing political service to the sage-king, who is the incarnation of the heavenly way. Hence Qu's despair derives from his loss of touch with Heaven after his political banishment. Wandering through mountains, marshes, and rivers, Qu turns to nature and the cosmos to look for alternative ways to communicate with the divine. Tragically, the Confucian emphasis on the sage-king as the sole transmitter of the divine prevented Qu from finding salvations beyond political service. His eventual suicide reveals the inability of Confucian literati to secure transcendence outside secular politics.

If Confucianism fails to provide answers for salvation, a Daoist withdrawal into nature seems to be an important, though less exhilarating, alternative. Liu proceeded to examine the critical term "easiness" (逍遙) in Daoist aesthetics, which has provided ultimate values for the disillusioned literati-turned-hermits in Chinese history. According to Liu, easiness has its origin in the Confucian-Daoist "pleasure principle" (樂感文化): the desire to secure this-worldly pleasure as the sole purpose of life. Compared to the Confucian rectification of pleasure into moral-political ends, Daoist pleasure is more of an "in-itself" entity that is transhistorical and trans-moral. In Daoism, the self's sensorial, emotional, and spiritual autonomy harmonizes with cosmological movements. In this regard, hermitism provides a spiritual haven. However, Liu noted that the Daoist assurance of "easiness," which locates transcendence within the mundane world, is almost diametrically opposed to the Christian notion of salvation through Christ. In the end, when salvation is attainable through the appreciation of the secular, the quest for transcendence dissolves into the moral affirmation of this-worldly existence.

The lacuna of Daoist aesthetics remained clear for Liu: when the rebellion against moral-political cultivation is transformed into an appreciation of the "state of nature," Daoism completes, rather than negates, the Confucian quest for human perfection in the profane realm. Furthermore, Liu chastised the perfectionist underpinning of Confucian-Daoist aesthetics as an ossified tradition devoid of transcendence. Since humanity has the capacity to reach perfection through moral cultivation and political governance, men can acquire that knowledge of the good without divine guidance. By contrast, Liu eulogized the Christian notion of sin, which for him promised salvation in most extraordinary ways: "Sinfulness is the primary linkage through which humanity is related to God. It makes men realize the insufficiency as well as the depravity of their natural state. Only through salvation can the sinner return to God."¹⁹ In Protestantism, the existential phenomenon of guilt makes men realize that imperfection is the essential structure of the profane world. This ontological priority of sin in turn establishes Christian faith as the only source of transcendence. In this regard, Liu insists that Christian redemption dwarfs all forms of Confucian-Daoist perfections precisely because of its acknowledgment of human imperfection.

With a single metaphysical leap, Liu traversed the ground separating Confucian-Daoist tradition and Christianity to prioritize the latter's exclusive relationship to the divine. This iconoclastic reading betrayed his profound frustration with the lack of otherworldly ethics in Chinese cultural traditions. Notwithstanding his

¹⁹Liu, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao*, 158.

impressionistic understanding of Christian faith,²⁰ Liu's unbounded synergism carried iconoclastic messages. His passion for God—the unconditional truth of divine revelation, the insurmountable gulf between humanity and the divine, and the aversion to historical reasoning—sprang out of serious reflections on the wrongdoings of Maoist political religiosity. Liu needed to completely abandon Confucian–Daoist tradition precisely because he was concerned about the trajectory from Chinese perfectionism to Mao's socialist utopia. In the face of a contaminated Chinese tradition, Liu nourished a longing for redemption through an utterly transcendent God. However, his fundamentalist thirst for ultimacy—that which alone redeems and salvages humanity—gradually reoriented Liu toward political theology.

From cultural Christian to Chinese Straussian

In the years following Tiananmen, Chinese cultural space was in the midst of a large-scale transition. The combination of authoritarianism and neoliberal market reforms presented unprecedented challenges for intellectuals, who had just begun to reflect on the bankruptcy of the 1980s “New Enlightenment.” At mid-decade, the question of fundamental values acquired its new urgency in the face of surging consumerism. New currents of thought produced heated exchanges on the concept of civil society and incremental reforms, on the revival of Confucianism and “national learning,” on the waning halos of “humanist spirit,” and on the return of the Mao cult. A thread running through these heated debates was the search for a normative value beyond the Western ideal of liberal democracy. As the state utilized popular nationalism to replace schizophrenic Marxism, conformist intellectuals moved to eulogize the charismatic basis of national identity beyond a secular basis. Above all, this authoritarian turn was accompanied by a growing skepticism regarding the normative ideal of modern rationalism.

Liu left for Switzerland in 1989 to pursue a PhD in Christian theology at the University of Basle. He returned to Hong Kong in 1993 as a research fellow at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Categorizing himself as a “cultural Christian,” Liu softened his earlier iconoclasm, and turned to advocate Christian ethics as moral instructions for contemporary Chinese society. The term “cultural Christian” is moderate insofar as it enables Chinese intellectuals to study Christian theology without converting into organized religions.²¹ This ambivalence on Liu's part bespoke a desire for religious reasoning on the one hand, and an asceticism toward revealed religions on the other. Liu's advocacy for a culturalist orientation of religion was usually associated with a larger intellectual trend known as Sino-Christian theology. Beginning in the early 1990s, scholars of Christian studies created theology journals, conferences, and study programs to discuss the normative potentials of religion in the post-Marxist public sphere. This broad coalition

²⁰Critics have questioned Liu's Christian faith because Liu approached his topic primarily through the works of Scheler, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky, rather than through a direct engagement with biblical scriptures. See Fredrik Fällman, “Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China,” in Chloë Starr, ed., *Reading Christian Scriptures in China* (London, 2008), 49–67, at 58.

²¹See Liu Xiaofeng, “Wenhua jidutu xianxiang de shehuixue pingzhu” (A Sociological Study of Cultural Christianity), in *Zheyidairen de pa he ai* (The Fear and Love of Our Generation) (1996) (Beijing, 2012), 171–81; also see Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven, 2016), 244.

attempted to resolve the crisis of humanistic value by invoking theological insights. Proponents argued that a theological passion for “truth” beyond secular reason provides a robust moral grounding to counter the disorienting tempos of globalization. Chinese humanities must remain open to a “nonreligious religion” because theological methodology points toward a path to secure the certainty of “meaning” against postmodern encroachment.²²

Yet Liu’s relationship with the major motif of the cultural-Christian movement was fraught with tensions. In Liu’s judgment, the designation of Christianity as “culture” adheres to a liberal rationalist theology whose historical reasoning nullifies the absoluteness of faith. Chinese theologians since the Republican era have sought to “indigenize” the divine personality of Jesus to bring biblical teachings closer to the Confucian tradition. This contextual theology often associates God with the Mandate of Heaven and reads Jesus into a Confucian saint, which transforms divinity into morality, and turns redemption into sanctification. Liu criticized the contextual theology for reducing Christian “faith” into Confucian “ethics.” For him, Sino-Christian theology, which denotes the merely historicist reception of the divine, must “unlearn” its specific cultural forms in order to attain a transhistorical relationship with the self-unveiling God.²³

In many ways, Liu’s critique resembles the crisis theology of the Weimar theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), who contended that the liberal historicist approach to religion risks closing the gulf between humanity and God. In his passionate manifesto, Barth argued that true faith rests on the conviction that “God is God.”²⁴ Inspired by Barth’s call to clear away historical reasoning to embrace the unconditional truth of the divine, Liu contended that Sino-Christian theology is relativistic because it anchors the eternal on a specific cultural form. However, the Barthian tone came into conflict with Liu’s desire to affirm the worldly manifestation of the Christian divine in the Chinese-speaking world. After all, a transcultural divine seems to be incompatible with his anxious attempt to resolve the spiritual lacuna of Chinese culture. Just as Barth’s disdain for secular historical categories ironically drove him to a gnostic vision of history,²⁵ Liu must have realized that his demand for an utterly transcendent God would lead him back to acknowledging the nihilistic and relativistic nature of the mundane world.

At this moment, Leo Strauss provided new inspiration. This encounter also began Liu’s gradual descent into political theology. Reading Strauss as early as 1993, Liu was instantly gripped by his “unremitting efforts to fight against nihilism and relativism.”²⁶ It nevertheless took him more than a decade to spawn a Chinese Straussian school. Liu’s radical turn is surprising in that he ceased to write about Christian faith after confronting Strauss. Strauss not only dispelled Liu’s illusions

²²See Chloë Starr, “Yang Huilin: An Academic Search for Meaning,” in Starr, *Chinese Theology*, 240–62.

²³See Liu Xiaofeng, “Hanyushenxue yu lishizhexue” (Sino-Theology and Philosophy of History), in Liu, *Shengling jianglin de xushi* (A Narrative about the Coming of the Holy Spirit) (2003) (Beijing, 2017), 102–4.

²⁴Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford, 1968).

²⁵See Peter E. Gordon, “Weimar Theology: From Historicism to Crisis,” in Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick, ed., *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy* (Princeton, 2013), 158.

²⁶See Liu Xiaofeng, “Qianji” (Preface), in Liu, *Shitelaosi de lubiao* (Leo Strauss as Guidance) (Beijing, 2013), 1–2, at 1.

about reenchanting the world through a transcendent God, but also led him back to Confucian perfectionism.

Most importantly, Liu began to reconsider the theological-political problem in a world devoid of transcendence. For Strauss, the conflict between Athens and Jerusalem reveals the eternal struggle between the quest for wisdom and the necessity to follow the law, since both values are fundamental. Medieval thinkers such as Maimonides (1135–1204) and Al-Farabi (870–950) advocated balancing esoteric practices of philosophy with exoteric conformity to the law. By contrast, the “anti-theological ire” initiated by Machiavelli and Hobbes instrumentalized philosophy to utilize knowledge for political purposes. From then on, modern “intellectuals,” without realizing the fundamentally different truth claims between religion and philosophy, transgressed the boundary between philosophy and politics and installed their vision of mass democracy and individual rights as coercive social norms for the public.²⁷

Strauss’s critique of modern intellectuals’ pretentious claim to resolve political problems must have sounded familiar to Liu, who had just begun to reflect on the heavy price his generation paid for their blind political engagement in the post-Tiananmen era. Modern Chinese intellectuals have always endowed knowledge with a decisive, even Promethean, role in formulating radical politics, inspiring revolutions and legitimating subversive ideals. To distance himself from this intellectual inheritance, Liu celebrated the “docility” of the Straussian wise man who acknowledges the irreconcilable tension between philosophy and the law.²⁸ In the wake of the bankruptcy of the 1980s cultural and political liberalization, esotericism points to a cynical solution to Chinese intellectuals caught between conformity and dissent. Through Strauss, Liu redefined intellectual morality as the art of balancing between the quest for wisdom and subordination under the law. Against the May Fourth intellectuals’ identification of virtue with public engagement, Liu upheld esotericism as an ethical action to simultaneously preserve political authority and pursue philosophical quest.

At this point Liu felt the need to anchor Straussian esotericism in the Chinese philosophical tradition. He quickly discovered a similar art of writing practiced by Confucian sages. Because Confucius claimed that he only “orally transmit[s] teaching without composing it” (述而不作), Liu speculated that the saint’s rejection of linguistic transparency conveys a similar reservation for the social task of philosophy. He read the *Analects* as the master’s cautious attempt to transmit philosophical truth orally to the chosen few: “The Master said, when a man may be spoken with, not to speak to him is to err in reference to the man. When a man may not be spoken with, to speak to him is to err in reference to our words. The wise err neither in regard to their man nor to their words.”²⁹ Just as

²⁷For a study of Strauss’s critique of the modern intellectual see Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, *Thinking in Public: Strauss, Levinas, Arendt* (Philadelphia, 2015), Ch. 1.

²⁸Liu Xiaofeng, “Ciwei de wenshun” (The Docility of the Hedgehog), in Liu, *Shitelaosi de lubiao*, 11–85.

²⁹Chinese original: “可與言，而與之不言，失人。不可與言而與之言，失言。知者不失人，亦不失言。” See “Wei Ling Kung,” in *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. James Legge (Digireads Publishing, 2017), 71–4; Liu Xiaofeng, “Liuyi shengren zan” (In Honor of the Sage), in *Zhe yidairan de pa he ai* 這一代人的怕和愛 (The Fear and Passion of Our Generation) (Beijing, 2007), 162–3; for an analysis see Jiang, “Searching for the Chinese Autonomy,” 26–7.

Strauss indicates that a philosopher must secretly “fish” for his disciples to avoid political attention, Confucius only shares his knowledge with men who “may be spoken with” in order to guard the truth from the intrusive public. Even when he disseminated his teachings in writing, he deployed obscure metaphors and allegories. Derived from the rhetorical style of the ancient Chinese chronicle *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the theory of “concealing truthful utterances behind righteous rhetoric” (微言大義) perpetuated the distinction between private teaching and public conformity.

Obviously, Liu’s somewhat arbitrary reading suffers many weaknesses. Confucius might have had significantly different reasons from Plato for employing indirect expressions. Plato treats the philosopher’s love for wisdom as a higher form of virtue. Strauss’s esotericism offers a pragmatic solution to mitigate the tension between the philosopher’s thirst for truth and the necessity to comply with the law of the city. In Confucianism, however, virtue is attained only when contemplative learning and political practice are brought together to formulate a “ritual-law” (禮法), an actualization of Confucius’ political design. The ritual-law is not a defective imitation of philosophical virtue, but rather plays a decisive role in orienting Confucian literati’s pursuit of knowledge. Confucius wrote between the lines not because he regarded political conventions as inferior to his philosophical inquiry, but out of frustration at his lifelong failure to find a benevolent king to enact his vision of ideal political order.

Liu’s negligence of Strauss’s disquieting awareness of the tension between conviction and knowledge has profound consequences. In Liu’s view, esotericism is not so much about the defense of philosophical eros as about recognizing the political utility of religion. Strauss gestures to religious convictions in exchange for his secret pursuit of eternal truth. Liu, on the other hand, reads the subordination of reason under faith as the prerequisite for a stable polity. In this regard, theological values and rituals, regardless of their fictitious nature, could be utilized by Confucian literati to secure their place in the secular political regime. In Liu’s perspective, although Confucian literati held themselves to be spokesmen for the “legitimate transmission of the Way” (道統), the moral-secular underpinning of their teaching proved insufficient to guard them against intrusive “political orthodoxy” (治統). To escape this dangerous condition, Confucian literati must learn to preach their knowledge in the name of the divine. For Liu, a divinized Confucianism, which holds literati as the transmitters of the divine, might better justify their place in governance.

Liu therefore paid particular attention to Strauss’s elucidation of the philosopher-king. In Strauss’s reading of Maimonides, philosophy’s precarious status before the biblical law asks for a philosopher-turned-prophet who is “teacher and governor in one.”³⁰ By practicing prophetology, the prophet creates a divine law that safeguards the civil order and simultaneously justifies his pursuit of philosophy as private knowledge. While it remains unclear whether Strauss himself regards the prophet as capable of producing a perfect kingdom envisioned by Plato, Liu appeared to be obsessed with the mystical-political power of the prophet. He came to the view that the Gongyang school (公羊學派), a heterodox Confucian

³⁰Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law* (Albany, 1995), 120.

offshoot originating in the Western Han Dynasty, contains rich resources for developing a Chinese prophethology. In Chinese history, followers of Gongyang school were repeatedly persecuted and suppressed because they believed Confucius to be an “uncrowned king” (素王) who is destined to rule. In support of their vision of a “philosopher-king,” disciples of the Gongyang school appropriated Daoist mythologies to formulate a theological underpinning for Confucius’ divine personality. In particular, Daoist notions, including “Five Elements cosmology” (五行生剋) “prophethology” (符讖災異) and “divine retribution” (大復仇), were introduced to sanctify Confucius as the chosen sage-king. Liu obviously saw parallels between Maimonides’s prophet and the Gongyang notion of the “uncrowned king.” For him, the mythic power of Confucius envisioned by the Gongyang followers could formulate a new symbiotic relationship between the literati class and the state. Confucian literati deploy prophethology to justify their exclusive ties to the ritual–law and to justify the ritual–law by means of mythology.

However, Liu’s use of Strauss to justify the “Confucian king” is somewhat contradictory. Since Strauss taught Liu that philosophical life could not be in tune with the demands of politics, why would Liu mobilize esotericism, the art of pursuing eternal wisdom, toward political ends? As Robert Pippin suggests, Strauss “seems mostly concerned with the political problem of philosophy rather than a philosophy of politics.”³¹ By contrast, Liu responded to Strauss’s dilemma by precisely developing a “philosophy of politics” that hails the sage-king to overcome the insurmountable tension between *polis* and knowledge once and for all. As Strauss put it, a “sectarian is born” when “his ‘subjective certitude’ of the truth of a solution becomes stronger than the consciousness that he may have of the problematical character of his solution.”³² Likewise, Liu’s dogmatic belief in the necessity of political theology has replaced his erstwhile pursuit of transcendence. At this moment, a neoconservative guru was born.

A conservative revolution

During the time when Liu was decoding Strauss’s teaching, China experienced a decade of sustained economic growth. Popular expectations for China’s growing power exploded in a new prosperous era. Intellectual debates, which had been polarized by the neo-leftist versus neoliberal confrontations in the early 2000s, evolved into complicated engagements with the dream of a world power. Advocates of liberalism introduced Habermas’s constitutional patriotism and the Rawlsian proviso of Kantian cosmopolitanism to paint a secular future for a pluralistic China. Neo-leftist intellectuals moved to theorize the rise of China as a messianic alternative to Western neoliberalism. Beyond the academic world, cultural conservatism gathered its momentum by claiming to resuscitate Confucian values against the progressive discourse of modern rights. In the conservative worldview, modernity encompassed liberal democracy, consumerism, and socialist legacies. They linked the entire cluster of “ideologies” and “-isms” to a dysfunctional

³¹Robert B. Pippin, “The Modern World of Strauss,” *Political Theory* 20/3 (1992), 448–72, at 448.

³²Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss–Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago, 2000), 196.

Western modernity that had decimated China over the past hundred years. The conservative revolt drew inspiration from political authoritarianism, antiquarian nostalgia, and Confucian ethics.³³ At the core was a quest for a sense of sacred community, homecoming, and cultural rootedness.

The nascent Chinese Straussians emerged to embrace this conservative trend. Liu secured a professorship in philosophy at Sun Yat-sen University in the early 2000s, and he started to collaborate with Gan Yang (1952–), a liberal-turned-conservative, to organize an ambitious translation project on the Straussian canon. Liu's didactic Straussian tone dragged him into a succession of schisms with the liberals, but controversies bred attention and attraction gave rise to an academic cult. Students who got tired of radical (mostly French) theories were mesmerized by the "prophet" who claimed to reveal esoteric messages to the chosen few. Devotees celebrated Liu's intellectual supremacy, which presumably surpassed those "high priests of democracy," who had fallen from wisdom to preach a compendium of mediocre knowledge. They were convinced that Strauss enables a genuine approach to grasp the root of Western civilization, while all modern political theories produce a corrupt and nihilistic image of the past. Above all, Strauss's paradigm of "ancient versus modern" liberated Chinese conservatives from their schizophrenic stance between Chinese cultural tradition and Western values. It enabled these scholars to problematize the modern project in the name of a "return to antiquity." From a Straussian standpoint, Hobbes was inspired by Machiavelli's anti-theological ire to replace the classical pursuit of virtue and perfection with an anthropological understanding of human desire. This Hobbesian reversal led to the rise of the modern rhetoric of subjective rights that vindicated the desires of the multitude, elevating the lowest human ends to the highest political goal. For Chinese Straussians, the liberal democracy against which Strauss consciously revolted was precisely characterized by this degradation of political virtue into hedonism. In this scenario, only a revival of China's premodern heritage could salvage the Chinese from their perverted pursuit of nihilistic modern values.

Yet this atavistic philosophy could not avoid confronting Mao's legacy. Against the conservative wish to retain the image of an unchanging Chinese cultural heritage untainted by the ugliness of Western modernity, China's socialist past was ironically the legitimate heir of modern nihilism. To include or exclude this revolutionary tradition entails contamination on the one hand, and state suppression on the other. Indeed, Chinese Straussians had no illusions about the modernist, egalitarian, and nihilistic features of Mao's mass democracy. But neither were they prepared simply to negate socialist history as a foreign anomaly. Gan Yang attempted to resolve this predicament by reconfiguring Maoism. In his shabby paradigm "reconciling three traditions" (通三統), Gan proposed to reformulate contemporary Chinese morality on the basis of Maoist egalitarian ethics, Deng Xiaoping's developmentalism, and Confucian sociality.³⁴ Nonetheless, this crude appropriation, based on the fantasy that a sanitized Maoism could become the carrier of traditional morality, was utilitarian at best.

³³Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen*, 83–112.

³⁴Gan Yang, *Tong Santong* (Reconciling Three Traditions) (Beijing, 2007).

If Gan was a conservative in despair, then Liu proved to be a much more sophisticated intellectual adventurer with a determination to fundamentally alter the horizon for understanding Maoism. In fact, Liu resolved the conservative paradox with a stunning declaration that *revolution is restoration*. Against the scholarly consensus to associate Mao's egalitarian ethos with the French Revolution, Liu traced the genesis of Mao's radical project to what he calls the "Confucian revolutionary spirit."³⁵ As Liu explained, the term revolution (*geming* 革命) first appeared in the ancient Chinese classic *I Ching*. While *ge* 革 is deeply imbricated in the ancient ritual of sacrifice, *ming* 命 refers to the mythic act of transmitting the Mandate of Heaven. With the two characters combined, *geming* stands for the symbiotic relationship between secular politics and the revelation of the Heaven's Mandate. From this theological perspective, regime transitions are but reflections of the divine will. In Liu's judgment, while the modern viewed revolution as a violent break from tradition, Confucian literati believed that revolution, which was guided by cosmological movements, was meant to restore the benevolent rule at the origins of Chinese civilization.

With this radical twist in place, Liu swiftly moved to extol Mao's revolution as the legitimate heir of the "Confucian revolutionary spirit." Through a reconstruction of Mao's early intellectual development, Liu judged that Mao's utopian schema derived not so much from modern egalitarianism as from "the Confucian belief in human perfectibility, the call for a virtuous ruler, and the conservative defense of Chinese civilization against alien encroachment."³⁶ Dismissing Western influences as flimsy, Liu viewed Mao's revolution as something that erupted organically from the Confucian search for restoration.

Liu's exposition of Mao's "restorative revolution" was deeply influenced by the Straussian–Schmittian notion of fear. Over the years, Liu was increasingly drawn to the "hidden dialogue" between Schmitt and Strauss on revealed religion as a ground for political authority.³⁷ As McCormick contends, the two share a Hobbesian understanding of *fear* as the primary source of political order: humanity's dangerousness requires the instillation of a religious force to frighten men into subordination.³⁸ In this regard, Schmitt's and Strauss's respective proposals—Leviathan state and biblical atheism—converge on the quasi-theological underpinning of political authority.³⁹ The Straussian–Schmittian exchange enabled Liu to locate the power of fear at the heart of the Confucian–Maoist revolutionary tradition. Whereas the mainstream Confucian tradition focused on the cultivation of inner moral sensibility through the triad of ritual (禮), propriety (義), and natural principles (理), Liu prioritized an external "king-rule" (王制) that imposes obligatory commandments on the people. Instead of relying on the edification of the mind through "ritual and music" (禮樂), the efficacy of the king-rule is assured by a quasi-religious

³⁵Liu Xiaofeng, *Rujiao yu minzuguojia* (Confucian Religion and Nation-State) (Beijing, 2007), 85–194.

³⁶Ibid., 116.

³⁷See Liu Xiaofeng, *Xiandai ren jiqi diren* (The Modern Man and His Enemy) (Beijing, 2006); Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago, 2006).

³⁸See John P. McCormick, "Fear, Technology, and the State: Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the Revival of Hobbes in Weimar and National Socialist Germany," *Political Theory* 22/4 (1994), 619–52.

³⁹John McCormick, "Post-Enlightenment Sources of Political Authority: Biblical Atheism, Political Theory, and the Schmitt–Strauss Exchange," *History of European Ideas* 37 (2011), 175–80.

authority that evokes fear and obedience.⁴⁰ Hence revolution for Liu was essentially the restoration of the ritual-law through a fearful sovereign ruler.

The drama of Liu's hermeneutics reached its climax as he proceeded to extol Mao as the modern reincarnation of the ancient king-rule. On 23 April 2013 Liu delivered a speech in Beijing entitled "How to Understand the Historical Significance of Chinese Republicanism." In this moment of decision, Liu blatantly celebrated Mao as a mystical and charismatic "founding father" (國父) of the Chinese nation. His talk began with a historical critique of modern China's "erroneous search" for the "principles of Republicanism": the political culture of equality, fraternity, and parliamentary democracy in the wake of the French Revolution. To overcome the fragility of liberal pluralism, as Liu contended, a fearful and quasi-religious sovereign is needed to provide guidance for moral conduct in a post-secular world. Liu then implied that Mao was the perfect candidate for such an earthly God. As the trinity of the "uncrowned king," the "national founding father," and the "revolutionary leader," Mao personified China's centennial civilizational struggle toward a politico-theological "middle kingdom" in the most sublime ways.⁴¹

Liu's blatant Maoism generated a storm of moral accusations. In a widely circulated public letter, the veteran Kantian scholar Deng Xiaomang (1948–) attributed Liu's moral corruption to the "deep-rooted inferior habits of Chinese literati." In Deng's judgment, the legacy of the post-Mao cultural renewal was based on the demystification of Maoist religiosity. Rebuking his former friend for "whitewashing the Cultural Revolution," Deng located Liu's political conformism in the complicity of Confucian literati with political power.⁴² Other opponents read Liu's ideological (de)conversion through the lens of the "lure of Syracuse," the Platonic fantasy to advise the tyrant and produce a perfect regime that had bewitched both Schmitt and Heidegger.⁴³ Public intellectuals mocked Liu's eagerness to sell his theologized Mao to the Chinese government with the term "emperor's teacher."

Seeing their oracle besieged by the priests of liberalism, supporters of Liu quickly defended his Maoist rhetoric as an esoteric form of "ethical" action. Invoking American neocons' defense of Bush's war, Chinese Straussians claimed that it is wise to "lie nobly" in order to conceal the unpleasant truth from the public. Liu's accusers had failed to read "between the lines" to appreciate the carefully designed contradictions between the latent and the hidden meanings of his provocations. This classical Straussian defense was feeble at best. In fact, many have argued against the seduction of reading between the lines to unveil the esoteric message that the master is a "closet liberal." Since Straussian dogma requires suspending judgment to appreciate the author "as he understood himself," meticulous exegesis inevitably nourishes reverence for the master's Platonic wisdom. As a result, these "well-armed guardians"⁴⁴ produced endless "clever or boring

⁴⁰See Liu, *Rujiao yu minzuguojia*, 225–44.

⁴¹Liu Xiaofeng, *Bainian gonghezhiyi* (The Significance of Republicanism) (Shanghai, 2011), 68–95.

⁴²Deng Xiaomang, "Ping Liu Xiaofeng de xueli" (A Critique of Liu Xiaofeng's Scholarly Reasoning), at www.aisixiang.com/data/69423.html (accessed 25 Oct. 2018).

⁴³See Mark Lilla, "Reading Strauss in Beijing," *New Republic*, 17 Dec. 2010, at <https://newrepublic.com/article/79747/reading-leo-strauss-in-beijing-china-marx> (accessed 25 Oct. 2018).

⁴⁴J. G. A. Pocock, "Prophet and Inquisitor: Or, a Church Built upon Bayonets Cannot Stand: A Comment on Mansfield's 'Strauss's Machiavelli,'" *Political Theory* 3/4 (1965), 385–401, at 385.

hagiographies” to demonstrate their “unsurpassed intellectual intimacy with the revered master.”⁴⁵ Any criticisms of Strauss are dismissed as deformed readings that fail to penetrate to the guru’s “real intentions.”⁴⁶ While Strauss did insist that truth is accessible only to those with a particular disposition of mind, his acolytes have politicized this hermeneutic to nullify any challenges to their well-guarded philosophical “truth.”

Strauss also claimed that “the problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.”⁴⁷ On the “surface” Liu was obsessed with Mao’s foundational role in the “crafting” of the Peoples’ Republic. Reclaiming Mao as the founding father was for Liu interconnected with securing the ethical and cultural foundations of the PRC regime. Here, Liu’s preoccupation with regime founding certainly bears the imprint of American Straussians who sought to replace Lockean liberal conceptions with classical political virtues. Strauss had associated the Declaration of Independence with classical natural “rights” that posit a normative and obligatory commandment against the permissive tendency of modern rights.⁴⁸ His American disciples further reclaimed a conservative core of American founding, from the crafting of the Constitution as an “educational ascent” designed by virtuous founders,⁴⁹ to the embodiment of “ancient faith” in Lincolnian statesmanship.⁵⁰ In their reading, the foundational truth of America was said to be characterized by thirsts for political distinction and moral virtue in opposition to the vulgarizing intentions of hedonistic liberalism.

Liu followed this path to excavate the conservative core of Mao’s founding act.⁵¹ Just as American Straussians attacked the Hobbesian–Lockean liberal underpinning of American founding, Liu rejected the leftist understanding of the PRC’s founding as the realization of “proletarian democracy.” Rather, the foundational truth of the Chinese regime, on which its legitimacy is based, emanates entirely from the reincarnation of the ancient “king-rule” in Mao. The locus of this “refounding” rests on Mao’s efforts to wage ruthless campaigns and wars that instilled fear and reverence for “Confucian political virtues” among Chinese citizens. In this way, Mao, as the embodiment of the Confucian sage-king, became the foundational truth of the PRC regime.

But where to locate Mao’s so-called “ancient political virtues”? To answer this question, Liu engaged in a lengthy dialogue with the preeminent New Confucian

⁴⁵Eugene Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Lebanon, 2007), 1.

⁴⁶For a critique of the problem of intentionality in Strauss’s hermeneutics see Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, 2002), 57–89.

⁴⁷See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago, 1995), 13, quoted in Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Heaven, 2011), 4.

⁴⁸See Leo Strauss, “What Is Liberal Education?,” in Hilail Gildin, ed., *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays* (Detroit, 1989), 311–20.

⁴⁹Walter Berns, *Freedom, Virtue, and the First Amendment* (Westport, 1969); Martin Diamond, “Democracy and ‘The Federalist’: A Reconsideration of the Framers’ Intent,” *American Political Science Review* 53/1 (1959), 52–68.

⁵⁰Harry Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln–Douglas Debates* (Garden City, 1959).

⁵¹See Liu Xiaofeng, *Yimei weijian 以美為鑒* (America as a Mirror) (Beijing, 2017), 225.

scholar Xiong Shili (1885–1968), who struggled to reconcile Confucian teaching with socialist ideology in the 1950s. Invoking the Confucian vision of “harmonious flows” (冲和) as the ultimate condition for the world’s disclosure, Xiong endorsed Mao’s apocalyptic revolution for annihilating all political conflicts and bringing greater peace to humanity.⁵² While Liu praised Xiong for his Heideggerian effort to “remold the Six Classics” (陶甄六经), he sought to refute Xiong’s egalitarian vision of Confucian socialism. In particular, Liu problematized Xiong’s treatment of Mao as a “democratic saint” (民主圣人). In Xiong’s perspective, Mao the democratic saint is not a formidable sage-king who stands before and above the people, but rather serves as an egalitarian “model” whom everyone could emulate. The equal opportunity to imitate and become a sage-like Mao thus demonstrates the egalitarian promise of socialism. By contrast, Liu opposed Xiong’s claim that “universal wisdom” (普智) under a democratic ruler could become possible. He warned that the desire to enlist the saint’s wisdom into the service of egalitarianism leads to the breakdown of distinctions and hierarchies, resulting in an anarchistic state in which “the worthies and the sages disappear in obscurity.”⁵³ The equalizing impulse of Xiong’s design inevitably leads to the dissolution of the fundamental differences between the ruler and the ruled, the nobleman and the commoner—distinctions that marked salient features of ancient political virtues.⁵⁴ In the end, Liu credited Xiong for coming up with an ingenious design for treating Mao as a sage-king. But he rejected Xiong’s socialist egalitarianism by emphasizing Mao’s role as a miraculous tyrant who could never be imitated or challenged.

In this circuitous way, Liu’s exegesis reveals his conservative reinterpretation of Mao’s founding act. Liu was convinced that a fundamental break with China’s revolutionary past requires a conservative “transvaluation” of Maoist ideals: to replace modern, nihilistic, and egalitarian impulses of revolution with classical, culturalist, and meritocratic values. This project stretches from Liu’s etymological investigation of revolution as “restoration” to his shabby attempt to identify Confucianism as the indispensable basis for Mao’s socialist project. By “discovering” Mao’s esoteric conservative impulse, Liu’s radical hermeneutics salvaged Chinese revolution from its dangerous liaisons with modern egalitarianism. Mao’s (mis)adventure was, above all, intended to restore the rule of the sage-king, so one should not let its “occasional” antitraditionalist elements obscure Mao’s role as the carrier of Confucian tradition. The result was a conservative shrine erected around Mao that kept both the liberal and the left out of reach. This conservative drama recounted how the centennial struggle to actualize the Confucian perfect regime was reduced to a shipwreck by the May Fourth movement of 1919, and sought to return to the primordial status of Chinese religious–political civilization by remolding Mao’s revolution as an artificial placeholder for a continuous Confucian cultural tradition.

If American Straussians provided Liu with means to refurbish the conservative spirit of Mao’s founding, Schmitt’s teaching injected this founding with a

⁵²Xiong Shili, *Lun Liujing* (On Six Classics) (Beijing, 2006).

⁵³Zhuang Zi, “All under Heaven,” in Chung Wu, trans., *The Wisdom of Zhuangzi on Daoism* (New York, 2008), 423–39, at 425, quoted in Liu Xiaofeng, *Gonghe yu jinglun* (Republic and Statecraft) (Beijing, 2012), 280.

⁵⁴Liu, *Gonghe yu jinglun*, Ch. 4.

decisionist flavor, accompanied by irrational resentments against liberal values. Indeed, beneath Liu's figurative Straussian defense of Mao, there also lies a Schmittian concern with the moral and political grounding of the Chinese *nomos*. For Liu, the painful bickering concerning Mao's right and wrongs will never arrive at a "decision," and the polarized reactions to a stigmatized socialist past nullified any substantive defense of the regime's virtue. The historicizing impulse of liberal historiographies on Mao led to sacrilegious acts against the foundational myth of the *polis*. Whereas liberal historians thought that the unveiling of Maoist catastrophes provided ways to "come to terms" with the traumatic past, Liu believed that the less gifted masses would only take this as corrupting binding social mores and cultural traditions. In many cases, people need a moralized and sanitized account of the founding father to positively identify themselves with a sacred founding. Schmitt teaches Liu that Chinese republicanism always requires a Sorelian myth that invokes "miraculous" decisions to guard the *nomos* of the Earth. Thus Mao could become the representative of sovereign-ruler, sage-king, and, above all, a Chinese *nomos* of cultural confidence and political unity.

Yet Liu's eagerness to refurbish a Confucian Mao remains in many respects historically implausible and philosophically contradictory. Most importantly, the anti-traditionalist facade of Mao proves too difficult to fit into the conservative royal robe that Liu had knitted for him. Liu was forced to conclude that Mao's virtue was a mixture of Confucian political virtue and "modern radicalism,"⁵⁵ as Mao vacillated between these two poles. Liu noted that the clashes between the Confucian quest for the "king-rule" and the modern search for socialist egalitarianism in Mao's thought culminated in the Cultural Revolution. In his arbitrary judgment, Liu suggested that this radical antitraditional revolution represented Mao's deviation from his pursuit of Confucian virtue into modern egalitarianism. Therefore the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution were entirely the byproduct of the French Enlightenment, and only a return to Mao's ancient political wisdom would do justice to these victims of "Western" violence.⁵⁶ Liu's shabby logic might only be apprehended from his Straussian esotericism: to retrieve Mao's ancient virtue from his nihilistic revolution, the wise must reformulate the tenet of Maoism from the "classical perspective" without exposing Mao's modern nihilism. Nevertheless, this also proved that Mao's socialist legacies were intertwined with modern nihilism throughout. The "nihilistic" kernel of Maoism eventually disrupted Liu's conservative revolution.

Conclusion: a Sphinx without a secret?

This article has tried to reconstruct three stages of Liu Xiaofeng's thinking with reference to the broader intellectual shift of the post-Mao era. From an immanent perspective, the evolution of Liu's thought might be understood as occurring in three interrelated crises: an inaugural crisis was caused by the waning of Maoist utopianism and temporarily resolved by Liu's search for Christian transcendence; a second crisis, punctuated by the incompatibility between Chinese and Western faith

⁵⁵Liu, *Bainian gonghezhiyi*, 93.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 94.

traditions, forced Liu to abandon the Christian God to return to the Confucian “sage-king”; and a third crisis, characterized by the antithesis between Confucian hierarchy and socialist egalitarianism, was reconciled through Liu’s conservative “transvaluation” of Mao’s revolution. Meanwhile, each new scenario emerged from and was responsive to the changing dynamics of China’s political landscape. Liu sought to overcome the crisis of socialist faith, to expose the lacuna of secular humanism, and to confront the uncertain conditions of the post-secular age. It is thus the complex and fluid articulations of divergent internal and external intellectual–political currents that unexpectedly, rather than inevitably, gave rise to Liu’s authoritarian political theology.

While Liu’s esoteric stance potentially nullifies any accusations that he is endorsing political tyranny, the authoritarian impulse of his conservative theology is unsettling. Despite the Straussian devotees’ efforts to portray themselves as the “guardians” of a Confucian past betrayed by the May Fourth movement, it often conjures up an anti-modernist resentment that is even more nihilistic than its liberal opponents. Liu does not seek to return to the pastoral origins of Confucian civilization. Rather, he utilizes an antiquarian nostalgia to beautify a highly aggressive doctrine of political hegemony. The so-called “ancient political virtues” are subordinated to a ferocious form of cultural chauvinism that is almost diametrically opposed to Confucian values such as benevolence and forbearance. Fueled by cultural frustrations and antipathy to Western liberalism, the Chinese Straussians resolutely reach beyond Burkean conservatism and strive to bring forward a new form of militant governance compatible with China’s global power. At last, Liu’s “esoteric” teaching recalls the image of a “Sphinx without a secret.”⁵⁷

In retrospect, Liu Xiaofeng struggled with the dialectic of the eternal and the temporal, immanence and transcendence, ground and nothingness, in his effort to cope with the politico-theological predicament of Mao’s revolution. In the end, while Liu took on a radical negation of the theological remainder of Maoist politics, he remained tethered to that very negation. Although the post-Mao generation cognitively identified themselves with the rationalized discourse of modern secularism, their political emotions remained haunted by a profound loss of touch with an “oceanic feeling” that once energized their pursuit of Maoist utopia.⁵⁸ This mystical energy carried Liu all the way from cultural Christianity to Chinese Straussianism. His circuitous pilgrimage toward “ultimate values” was characterized by ruptures, conversions, and creative (mis)appropriations. At the beginning, the young iconoclast deplored the fact that the totality of Chinese tradition could not maintain its historical innocence after the dehumanizing practices of Mao’s revolution. Thirty years after, Liu now cultivates a muscular yearning for the sovereign perpetuity of the Party. Did he eventually overcome his fear of revolutionary violence by embracing Mao’s foundational power? This Kierkegaardian “leap of faith” shocked the liberal as a scandalous tale of political regressions. But to simply project a “psychoanalytic frame” that narrates Liu’s Maoist turn

⁵⁷M. F. Burnyeat, “Sphinx without a Secret,” *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1985, at www.nybooks.com/articles/1985/05/30/sphinx-without-a-secret.

⁵⁸Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York, 1989).

into a tragedy of “perverted Oedipal rebellion” underestimates the complexity of Liu’s reflections.⁵⁹ Across the sophisticated intellectual resources that Liu has tinkered with, one can only mark out a vague contour of his redemption: the search for transcendence beyond politics aroused the desire for an absolute ground for politics; the remote God of Barth materialized into the fearful sovereign of Schmitt; repugnance against revolutionary masses fueled a dogmatic defense of aristocratic virtues. Finally, excursions into ancient, medieval, and modern forms of divine nexus did not negate revolutionary sacrality. Rather, Mao was ostracized from the postrevolutionary order only to return as the incarnation of a Confucian empire that is still to come.

⁵⁹For a critique of this psychoanalytic frame see Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick, “Introduction: Weimar Thought: Continuity and Crisis,” in Gordon and McCormick, *Weimar Thought*, 1–11, at 3–4.

Cite this article: Tu H (2023). From Christian Transcendence to the Maoist Sublime: Liu Xiaofeng, the Chinese Straussians, and the Conservative Revolt against Modernity. *Modern Intellectual History* 20, 323–344. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244322000063>