

### Chinese centrist liberal critics of Trump: a reconsideration of contemporary Chinese liberalism

Gao, Gengsong

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gao, G. (2023). Chinese centrist liberal critics of Trump: a reconsideration of contemporary Chinese liberalism. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 52(1), 25-49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026221103280>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

# Chinese Centrist Liberal Critics of Trump: A Reconsideration of Contemporary Chinese Liberalism

Gengsong Gao

Journal of Current Chinese Affairs  
2023, Vol. 52(1) 25–49  
© The Author(s) 2022  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/18681026221103280  
journals.sagepub.com/home/cca



## Abstract

This article challenges the existing scholarship's characterisation of Chinese liberal intellectuals as Trumpian intellectuals. By conducting a close reading of Chinese academic publications, lectures and opinions aired on social media, this article finds that besides Trump's Chinese liberal fans, many leading Chinese liberal intellectuals harshly criticised Trump. However, they do not align themselves with American liberals in making all-out partisan criticisms of Trump and American right-wing politics. Instead, their criticisms are mostly centrist. This article argues that Chinese liberal intellectuals' centrist criticisms of Trump reflect their Confucian, egalitarian and moderate nationalist sympathies, dimensions of their thoughts which have been ignored by existing scholarship regarding them. By exploring Chinese centrist liberal critics of Trump, this article brings to light the ideological heterogeneity within the Chinese liberal camp previously lumped together under the umbrella of "anti-authoritarianism."

## Keywords

Liberals, Trump, China, centrist

## Introduction

The most vocal critics of Donald Trump in the United States are liberal journalists and intellectuals. However, there emerged many liberal intellectual fans of Trump in

---

Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Gengsong Gao, University of Richmond, Carole Weinstein International Center, Suite 205, 211 Richmond Way, Richmond, VA 23173, USA.

Email: [ggao@richmond.edu](mailto:ggao@richmond.edu)



Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access page (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

China. This curious phenomenon first drew media attention. One article in *New York Times* attributes Chinese liberal Trumpmania to political tactics. It argues that Chinese liberals champion Trump mostly because they want to use Trump's tough anti-communist position to pressure the increasingly authoritarian Chinese communist government to loosen control and trigger China's socio-political reforms (Y. Li, 2019). Lin Yao (2020), a Yale-trained Chinese legal scholar and public intellectual, finds the "tactics" explanation problematic, because Chinese liberal intellectuals had fallen for a Trumpmania even before Trump started the trade war against China. He argues that Chinese liberal intellectuals' support of Trump is not merely tactical but authentic, stemming from their deeply-seated west-centrism, or in Lin's phrase, "beacon complex," that is, "the idealization of the West and the United States in particular, as the political and civilizational beacon of light for the rest of the world" (Lin, 2020: 4). Chinese liberals look up to Trump as the staunchest defender of the Western political and civilisational beacon that is now threatened by feminism, multiculturalism, non-Christian immigrants, ethnic minorities, social movements, political correctness and "white left," a derogatory term that Chinese netizens use to satirise those they perceive as only caring about topics such as immigration, minorities, LGBT and the environment without any sense of real problems.

Moreover, Lin points out that Trump's supporters in China are not confined to liberal intellectuals but include non-liberal intellectuals. To account for the cross-ideological admiration of Trump in China, Lin (2020: 9–14) offers a dichotomous narrative of modern Chinese intellectual tradition as divided by liberal intellectuals' "beaconism" and non-liberal intellectuals' "vindictivism." According to Lin, the former glorifies the West as the beacon of light while the latter vindicates and idealises the Chinese civilisation against Western civilisation, but both have internalised racist and social Darwinist ideologies that become the fundamental cause of the cross-ideological Trumpian idolisation in China. Lin imputes Chinese liberal intellectuals' deeply rooted pernicious ideologies and political misconceptions to their historical traumas. First, the previous "weak" China's continuous defeats and humiliations by the powerful West since the First Opium War led Chinese intellectuals to believe in nothing but power politics and social Darwinist doctrines of "might is right" in an anarchical jungle of international politics. Second, the horrors and disasters that liberal intellectuals suffered under the Maoist ultra-leftist totalitarian regime pushed them on a blind political pilgrimage to the West as an ideal political destination and catapulted them on a slippery slope from anti-ultra-leftist Maoism to opposition against all leftist progressive politics (Lin, 2020: 10–13).

Once Lin's article got published in 2020, his characterisation of Chinese liberal intellectuals as "Trumpian intellectuals" and his explanation in terms of the "beacon complex" have been widely reported and used by both Chinese and Western journalists and scholars to discuss Chinese intellectual politics. Lin's research deserves the credit for exposing some of the self-proclaimed pro-democracy Chinese liberal intellectuals' hidden pernicious Trumpian ideologies, disclosing their historical origins and providing a convincing explanation for the puzzling Chinese liberal Trumpmania. Moreover, Lin does not treat

Trump's liberal fans in China as a homogeneous group, but has noted its internal differences. He coins two theoretical terms "political beaconism" (idealisation of the West as the political "beacon of light") and "civilizational beaconism" (unquestioning glorification of the presumably "advanced" Western civilisation) to account for Trump cheerers' different forms and degrees of support (Lin, 2020: 9, 12). Lin (2020) thinks that the more political than civilisational beaconists have more faith in the integrity of the American political system, thinking that Trump's failure for re-election in 2020 is American voters' choice; whereas the more civilisational than political beaconists are more blind followers and more likely to blame Trump's defeat on "Baizuo's (white left) sabotage of Trump's leadership, and on American voters' acquiescence to Baizuo's program of civilizational self-destruction" (pp. 15–16).

In addition to Chinese liberal fans, Lin also mentioned the existence of a minority of Chinese liberal critics of Trump, but did not seriously examine these questions: if Chinese liberal intellectuals have experienced a comprehensive "Trumpian metamorphosis" as he claims, then why are there still liberal critics of Trump? How do they criticise Trump? Are their criticisms only personal choices or represent a long-established intellectual tradition? Other than political misperceptions and inimical ideologies, have modern Chinese intellectuals learned something else from the historical traumas and tragic memories? In addition to the extremist voices of liberal west-centrists and non-liberal revanchists, are there not fairly rational and moderate liberal intellectuals who are appreciative of Western democracy while also being able to analyse the relative strengths and weaknesses of Western politics and Chinese tradition? Obviously, Lin considers the "minority" of Chinese Trump critics as unimportant in comparison with what he perceives as the dominant Trump fans. Then it is not surprising that he does not explore the questions related to the Chinese critics of Trump and modern Chinese intellectual tradition.

This article is not intended as an empirical study to draw a quantitative conclusion about whether the critics of Trump are the minority or the majority of the Chinese liberal camp, but to explore this neglected intellectual cohort's critiques of Trump and their historical origins and ideological underpinnings. This exploration is worthwhile, because liberal critics of Trump may be less than his fans in numbers, but are no less in terms of influence and significance. Many leading liberal intellectuals use "big split" (大分裂, *da fenlie*) to describe the debate over Trump and American politics within the Chinese liberal camp (Y. Deng, 2020; He, 2021). Previous Chinese intellectual circles often split over domestic issues. However, as China is gradually involved in the America-dominated world order, Chinese intellectuals of different persuasions are generally more concerned with foreign politics and international relations. They believe what is happening in the USA will make a bigger difference to China than before. Besides, freedom of speech and discussion on domestic politics are more restricted since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. Therefore, ideological affinities and conflicts within the Chinese intelligentsia are more likely to be projected on the discussions on foreign politics than on domestic politics. Moreover, Trump's blatant articulation of right-wing ideologies could strike a deeper chord with the right-wing Chinese liberals. Then it is not surprising that Trump exerted such a huge impact on the Chinese intellectual

circle. The widely-felt Trump-induced split within the liberal camp does not necessarily mean the liberal critics of Trump equal his liberal fans in quantity but clearly indicates the former's huge influence on the Chinese intellectual circle. Many liberal critics of Trump are the widely read and frequently cited liberal intellectuals in Chinese academia and social media. Since early 2000, the internet in China experienced rapid development. Online discussion forums, blogs, Weibo and Wechat emerged and mushroomed one after another, which provides academic intellectuals with more outlets to express their political ideas. Meanwhile, the online outlets also offer politically engaged students, journalists and non-academic professionals a convenient and accessible discursive space for the expression of their views and their interaction with academic intellectuals. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many of the intellectual disputes over Trump examined in this article are published online (for detailed discussions on the impact of the Internet on Chinese intellectual debate, see Meng 2018).

Some of them are more partisan liberal critics that take an American left position to make an all-out partisan critique of Trump (Lin Yao, Beidafei, Zhou Lian, Cheng Yizhong, Cheng Yinghong, Teng Biao [2020], Du Yanlin, Wong Wai-Hung [2016], etc.) and American right-wing politics. There are also prominent liberal intellectuals (Xu Jilin, Liu Qing, Zi Zhongyun, Qin Hui, Zhang Qianfan, Xu Zhangrun, Xiao Xuehui, etc.) that not only condemn Trump's vulgarism, racism, neoliberalism and populist authoritarianism, but also use Trump as a springboard to reflect critically upon American politics and Western civilisation. Meanwhile, they do not go to the extreme of rejecting the West in toto, but argue for the mutually enriching dialogue between Chinese and Western political traditions and civilisations. For instance, in 2021, Zhang Qianfan, a professor of law at Peking University and a leading liberal intellectual, edited with liberal journalist Rong Wei three volumes of *Liberalism Series* (Zhang and Rong, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) that collected Chinese liberals' articles "focused on one theme of critiquing Trumpism and the far-right thought" (Zhang and Rong, 2021a: vii). Zhang Qianfan (2012: 1) identifies himself as "a person of the golden mean." In the preface to the first volume titled "Critiques of Trumpism," Zhang emphasises that the Chinese critics of Trump in the volume "reject the extremism of both the left and the right in favor of the broad and safe middle ground" (Zhang and Rong, 2021a: vii). I call these liberal critics as "centrist liberals." They are both critical and appreciative of the left and the right, Chinese tradition and Western tradition, seeking for a constructive dialogue between the former and the latter (Gao, 2021: 12). They go well beyond Lin's dichotomous portrayal of modern Chinese intellectual tradition characterised by beaconism and revanchism.

Lin's overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Chinese liberal intellectual tradition is not an isolated case. In analysing Chinese intellectuals' and netizens' discussions and debates on Chinese tradition and global politics, English scholarship tends to characterise contemporary Chinese intellectuals and modern Chinese intellectual tradition as deeply ingrained in racist, social Darwinist, ultra-rightist and hegemonic ideologies (Cheng, 2015; Peng, 2020; C. Zhang, 2020; Zhao, 2015). This line of scholarship should take the credit for exposing the hidden reactionary ideologies in contemporary Chinese liberal intellectuals who claim to champion "human rights" and "universal values."

Yet, its overwhelmingly pathological approach to Chinese intellectual tradition ignores both previous and current Chinese liberal intellectuals' critical agency and intellectual competence. The one-sidedly negative depiction of contemporary Chinese liberalism and Chinese liberal intellectual tradition is neither consistent with historical facts nor can account for liberal intellectuals' widespread critical reflections on Trump, American politics and Western democracy. By exploring the centrist liberal critics of Trump, this article aims to illuminate the ignored Confucian, social democratic, dialogical and moderately nationalist dimensions of the pro-West and anti-authoritarian Chinese intellectual tradition. Its contribution lies not only in complementing Lin's widely received intellectual account, but also in correcting the existing scholarship's overwhelmingly negative characterisation of Chinese intelligentsia as deeply ingrained in the pernicious racist, social Darwinist and far-right ideologies. This article seeks to employ the discussion on the centrist liberal critics of Trump as a point of entry to reconsider the modern Chinese intellectual tradition and reveal the complicated impacts of historical traumas and the ideological diversities within the Chinese liberal camp previously lumped together under the umbrella of "anti-authoritarianism."

## **The Formation and Evolution of Post-Maoist Liberal Intellectuals**

To understand Chinese liberal intellectuals' critical attitude towards Trump, we need to start by understanding what the loaded word "liberal" means in the contemporary Chinese context and its intellectual origins and historical evolution. As Gray (1995) observes, any well-informed understanding of liberalism requires "a clear insight into its historicity, its origins in a definite cultural and political circumstance" (p. xi). "Liberal," no matter when and where it is mentioned, is associated with its literal meaning "liberation." However, the questions of who needs to be liberated, what is the major barrier to liberation, what are the best strategies to achieve liberation, and what principles and theories should guide the liberation, have different answers depending on different contexts, which invest the word "liberal" with different meanings. As the 1980s and the 1990s were the formative years of current Chinese liberal critics of Trump, understanding their intellectual genealogy can help us better understand their later critical analysis of Trumpism and Western politics.

Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949, Chinese intellectuals were oppressed and persecuted by the authoritarian party-state. However, there have always been daring intellectuals who sought liberation from CCP's monopoly on power and pursued political reform. These anti-authoritarian intellectuals are often considered "liberals." Instead of forming a coherent ideology and tightly-knit network, Chinese liberals are defined mostly by their common opposition to the CCP's dictatorial regime in various degrees (J. Li, 2017: 3). They view CCP's unchecked monopoly on power as the primary obstacle to China's democratic development and social progress. Their opposition against the dictatorial regime is generally guided by the Western

liberal political ideals and principles of individual liberty, universal human rights, separation of powers, rule of law, democratic election and market economy (D. Li, 2014; Tang and Mcconagh, 2018). As the formation of current Chinese liberals in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with the domination of Reagan–Thatcher’s neoliberalism and the popularity of their theoretical master Hayek, scholars attribute the intellectual origin of Chinese liberals’ Trump-idolisation to their internalisation of the dominant right-wing Western neoliberalism that advocates privatisation, marketisation and deregulation against the previous Roosevelt New Deal’s state intervention and the welfare state (Lin, 2020; Q. Zhang, 2020). However, the mere temporal parallel does not necessarily lead to an intellectual parallel. Actually, Chinese liberals’ intellectual evolution in the last two decades of the twentieth century was too complicated to be depicted simply as undergoing a uniform Hayekian or far-right transformation.

Chinese liberals are generally pro-West and focus their critique on domestic authoritarianism and fanatic nationalism. However, they also share with non-liberal intellectuals some nationalist commitment as is manifested in their efforts to preserve a Chinese national identity and develop a Chinese style liberalism (Davies, 2007: 15–57). As Qin Hui (2013), a professor of history at Tsinghua University and leading liberal intellectual, puts it, “liberalism is transnational....but Chinese liberalism should be targeted at and able to solve China’s problems and discuss global and future problems from the perspective of China” (pp. 116–117). Liu Qing (2006: 176–180), a liberal professor of political philosophy at East China Normal University, went a step further by drawing upon Isaiah Berlin to provide a theoretical justification for a moderate Chinese liberal nationalism that can address the tension between the nationalism that is emotionally attached to a particular land, and the liberalism that prioritises universal liberal principles. This moderate nationalist commitment makes it possible for the pro-West liberal intellectuals not to blindly glorify but to reflect critically on Western politics and economics and reclaim China’s local tradition in varying degrees.

Emerging from the famines and disasters caused by the Maoist command economy, Chinese intellectuals in the post-Maoist era were generally inclined towards the market economy. Both the pro-market classical liberalism and modern neoliberal economic theories of Hayek and the Austrian School have exerted a huge influence on the post-Maoist intellectual circle and contributed to the formation of a cohort of economic liberals (Zhang Weiyang, Xu Xiaonian, Mao Yushi, etc.) who unreservedly promote privatisation and marketisation and oppose state intervention and wealth redistribution. However, the reception of Hayek in China is complicated. It is true that the works of Hayek and Austrian School did breed some economic liberals’ belief in an unregulated market economy, which laid the intellectual foundation for their support of Trump whom they perceive as a staunch defender of the market economy and unflinching critic of the welfare state. However, there are also liberals who do not blindly embrace Western right-wing theories. For instance, Deng Zhenglai (2005), the late influential liberal scholar of political theory and prolific translator of Hayek’s works, was critical of Hayek’s “ideological closedness.” He urged Chinese liberals not to unthinkingly internalise and popularise Hayekian neoliberal ideology, but to explore the fundamental

epistemological questions Hayek raises concerning the construction of social order. Deng contended that Chinese intellectuals should move from a “pre-reflective” to “reflective” approach to Western theories and commit themselves to build “China’s own social science,” namely, not take Western theories as ready-made answers and authoritative conclusions, but as a series of thought-provoking questions to be critically reflected upon. Deng emphasised that Chinese intellectuals should exercise their own critical agency, form their own answers, develop their own theories and establish “Chinese academic subjectivity.”

Hayek eulogises the Anglo-American conservative tradition, but it has not led all Chinese liberals to be west-centric and uncritically embrace “beaconism.” Instead, Hayek’s emphasis on the importance of tradition to the building of a free modern society helped some political liberal intellectuals (who oppose both the authoritarian state’s economic exploitation and political oppression) cultivate their sympathies for the native Confucian tradition (Gao, 2021). Hayek’s tradition-based philosophy of history is particularly appealing to contemporary Chinese liberal intellectuals for two reasons. First, it provided a plausible explanation for the failure of the New Culture Movement’s iconoclastic liberalism and the rise of Maoist totalitarianism in modern Chinese politics. Second, Hayek’s tradition-based liberalism helped to resolve the pro-West Chinese liberal (and liberal-leaning) intellectuals’ long-term inner tension between the preservation of Chinese identity and pursuit of individual liberty, building a modern nation-state and establishing a democratic system. The modern nation-state requires a national pedigree. If contemporary Chinese liberal intellectuals keep demonising their own tradition and history and viewing them as obstacles that must be eradicated to achieve democracy and personal freedom, it would be difficult for them to build China into a distinctive modern nation with its own tradition and history, and maintain their Chinese identity (Huters, 2005: 41–42).

Meanwhile, since the 1980s, the modern New Confucians who were active in the Republican era or Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States after 1949, such as Liang Shuming, Qian Mu, Zhang Junmai, Mou Zongsan, Tang Junyi, and Xu Fuguan, were rediscovered and reaffirmed by leading post-Tiananmen liberal(-leaning) intellectuals (Qin, 1999: 130–132; Z. Xu, 2008: 82–85). Unlike current mainland new Confucians who discredit Western liberalism and glorify the superiority of Confucian-centred Chinese civilisation, these Republican and overseas modern new Confucians made a relatively balanced analysis of Chinese tradition and Western modernity’s respective strengths and weaknesses and attempted to integrate the two. The Hayek-induced turn to tradition and the modern new Confucians-induced recuperation of tradition reinforced each other. At the very beginning, these liberal intellectuals only searched for Confucian political ideas and institutions that complied with Western liberal principles and institutions. However, as they delve deeper into Confucianism and witness the growth of China’s national power and the unfolding of the recurring financial crises in Western democracies, some of them have begun to explore the Confucian tradition for intellectual resources that can complement Western liberalism and build a constitutional democracy with Chinese characteristics. In other words, Confucian principles, institutions and



practices could not only be of instrumental value but also of substantive and remedial value to Western democracy. For instance, Qin (2002: 104–108) started by unveiling the ignored anti-authoritarian spirit and practice in what he called “pure Confucians” (纯儒, *chunru*) in premodern Chinese history, and then moved to argue for the potential value of the Confucian ideal of “fusion of humanity and nature” (天人合一, *tianren heyi*) to the cultivation of environmental awareness and the reconfiguration of the Western anthropocentric relationship between man and nature. Xu Jilin, an influential intellectual historian and liberal intellectual, contends that the Confucian concepts and institutions of “dual authority of Confucian Way and Orthodox tradition of governance” (道统与正统的双重权威, *daotong yu zhengtong de shuangchong quanwei*), “co-governance by Confucian scholar-official and emperor” (士大夫与君主共治天下, *shidafu yu junzhu gongzhi tianxia*), “censorate system” (御史制度, *yushizhidu*), “critical public opinion” (清议, *qingyi*) are compatible with the liberal principle of checks and balance and modern democratic constitutional framework (J. Xu, 2012: 44–59). Later, Xu Jilin (2018: 127–154) went a step further to propose a de-signified Confucian idea of *tianxia* (天下) to revise the existing Euro-American-centric liberal world order and build more equal and more dialogic international relations. Xu Zhangrun is a liberal scholar of law widely praised by the Western media for his courageous open criticism of Xi Jinping. However, few have noted Xu Zhangrun’s (2014: 5–72) critique of Western democracy and his reception of Confucianism. Xu deplored the modern liberal state’s neutrality on the moral and ethical question of what a good life should be and advocated “The Chinese Language Law” (汉语法学, *hanyu faxue*) that aims to supplement the modern impersonal liberal political and legal system with a Confucian-style ethical and emotional dimension. Zhang Qianfan (2012), a renowned liberal professor of constitutional studies at Peking University, insists that the Western political philosophy is rights-based while Confucian political philosophy is duty-oriented. Both embody their respective merits, flaws, excesses and compatibility with the other. The emphasis of the duty-oriented Confucian ethics on human dignity could lay the foundation of individual rights and modern political institutions. Zhang underscores that rights-oriented liberalism and duty-oriented Confucianism should “complement each other” to create new contemporary rights discourse that can avoid both the inflation of rights-induced self-centredness and the excessive expansion of governmental power (pp. 1–3).

It must be pointed out that, unlike most contemporary mainland Confucian scholars who tout the absolute superiority of Confucian tradition and Chinese civilisation over Western civilisation, these liberal intellectuals with Confucian sympathies are not oblivious to the flaws within Confucianism itself. For instance, while praising “pure Confucians” persistent criticisms of premodern China’s arbitrary emperors, Qin (2002: 91) also reproached their overemphasis on moral idealism and failure to oppose the penetration of statist legalism into an institutional structure. Likewise, Xu Jilin (2012: 49–56) cherishes the Confucian political institutions’ intended goal of limiting the monarchical power, but recognises their lack of efficiency in resisting the centralisation of imperial power. These liberal intellectuals with Confucian sympathies are both appreciative and

critical of Western liberalism and Chinese Confucianism without devolving into blind followers of either. They seek to build a Chinese liberalism and democracy that is based upon critical reflections on the relative achievements and losses of Confucian tradition and Western democracy. Their critical and dialogical approach is well beyond the dichotomous categorisation of Chinese intellectuals into Western beaconists or civilisational vindicativist. Lin's beaconist versus vindicativist narrative reduces what is a varied and plural field of Chinese liberalism into a binary either-or analytic framework and neglects the nuances, grey areas, middle ground and critical syntheses between the polarities. As is shown in the next section, these liberal intellectuals with Confucian sympathies and critical reflections on Western democracy become the major centrist critics of Trump.

Liberal intellectuals' Confucian-informed critical reflections on the Western liberal democracy are also reinforced by their reception of Western intellectuals' self-criticisms and self-reflections. With their pro-West position and their good command of Western languages, Chinese liberal intellectuals are generally more receptive to diverse Western thoughts and theories than other intellectual factions and without confining themselves to neoliberalism. They are not only influenced by the right-wing Hayek, but also influenced by a variety of other Western right-wing and left-wing, conservative and liberal theories that steer them away from an utter Hayekian or ultra-rightist metamorphosis. In the 1980s, in *China: Culture and the World*, one of the most influential editorial teams gathered many promising liberal intellectuals who translated the works of Marx, Weber, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Arendt. They made deep analyses and pointed critiques of modern Western political and cultural conditions. Since the 1990s, an array of more recent Western theories kept being imported into the Chinese intellectual circle, ranging from the Austrian School, Ronald Coase's institutional economics and Robert Nozick's right-wing liberalism to John Rawls' left-wing liberalism, Donald Dworkin's theory of equality and Habermas' criticism of advanced capitalism (Qin, 1999: 116–133). While the left-wing liberal and critical theories were mostly used by the liberals' intellectual rival New Left to criticise China's rampant marketisation, social stratification and cultural degradation, we can hardly say that liberal intellectuals are uninfluenced by these left-wing progressive critical theories and egalitarian policy positions. As Xu Jilin (1997: 29) points out that China's deeply seated Confucian egalitarian idea of “inequality rather than scarcity is the cause of trouble” (不患寡而患不均, *buhuangua er huanbujun*) made it difficult for Chinese intellectuals to accept the Hayekian unfettered market economy and its resultant huge economic inequality with ease. Xu (2014) clarified his position that

although I belong to the liberal camp, I also have sympathetic understanding of the New Left theories....on the liberal spectrum, I am not a right-leaning Hayekian but a left-leaning Rawlsian. While insisting on the principle of freedom first, I view equality as an important value. By equality, it not only means Hayekian transactional justice, but also Rawlsian 'distributive justice' that leans towards the disadvantaged.

Not only Xu Jilin but also many other liberal intellectuals have egalitarian and social democratic sympathies. For instance, to refute the characterisation of liberal intellectuals as social Darwinists and identification of Chinese liberalism with Reaganism, Zi Zhongyun (2002), a senior diplomat-turned liberal scholar of American studies, insists that “the temporary and legal wealth gap is not the necessary price paid for economic growth” (pp. 4–7). She contends if society is allowed to take its own course, it will be increasingly unequal. A redistributive state is needed to take active actions to assist the disadvantaged and limit the ever-increasing inequality, especially in China where the government does not even provide the migrant workers with basic equal economic, cultural and political rights as the urban citizens (Zi, 2002; 6). Like Zi, Qin also emphasises the importance of welfare and social justice and the West’s better protection of basic human rights and civil liberty. Qin (2013) rejects the CCP’s neoliberal economic principle of “efficiency is prioritized while taking fairness into consideration” in favour of “fairness is prioritized and efficiency will be automatically delivered” (p. 15). Qin holds that in the West, “procedural fairness” (程序公平, *chengxu gongping*) has been mostly realised, but in China, even the basic “procedural fairness” has not been achieved, let alone the “initial fairness” (起点公平, *qidian gongping*) and “outcome fairness” (结果公平, *jieguo gongping*). Therefore, Chinese intellectuals’ debate should not follow contemporary Western intellectuals’ right-left polemics over the question of whether more individual freedom or more state welfare is needed. Instead, Chinese intellectuals should look for the “common bottom line” (共同的底线, *gongtong de dixian*) of opposing the violation of the disadvantaged groups’ interests by the unchecked state power and privileged interest groups. Accordingly, Chinese intellectuals should not attack either the Western established right or the established left but draw upon the former to struggle for more individual freedom and the latter to justify the need for more social welfare from the authoritarian state (J. Li, 2017: 153–156; Qin, 2012: 19–26). Xu is a vocal liberal intellectual and former researcher at China’s Social Science Academy. Xu used to be a scholar of analytic philosophy, but China’s radical social transformation in the 1990s and his participation in the resultant intellectual debate over China’s future pushed him to study Western political theories. He praises the right-wing Hayek’s and Novick’s theorisation of personal liberty and individual rights while also questioning whether they are pushing them to extremes. Xu (2003) cites the Taiwan Nationalist government’s The 37.5% Arable Rent Reduction Act in 1951 to argue that minor violations of individual landlords’ rights can benefit both the propertied and the non-propertied. On the other hand, Xu appreciates the left-wing Rawls’ difference principle that requires an economic system to be organised so that the least advantaged members of society are better off than they would be in any alternative economic arrangement while also questioning Rawls’ assumption that some individuals’ intellectual advantages are public assets and their material gains are undeserved. Xu (2003: 3–8) laments the lack of Confucian “doctrine of the mean” in the Western debate between left-wing and right-wing philosophers of political philosophy. However, despite his critique of both Western left-wing and right-wing

political theories, Xu is not unlike Zi and Qin in holding that in terms of political realities, Western democracies are still better than China, for the latter lacks both basic political freedom and economic equality (Xu, 2003: 9–10).

Contemporary Chinese liberal intellectuals are receptive to an array of conflicting Western political ideas and theories introduced to China. However, they are not obsessed with a particular one nor seek to integrate the imported diverse and contradictory theories into a systematic and abstract liberal theory. Instead, they take a highly pragmatic approach by appropriating what they perceive as instrumental to improving China's social and political conditions. For most liberal intellectuals, China is lacking in both personal freedom and social welfare in comparison with the West. Therefore, both the orthodox Western left and right political theories and forces are of value to China despite their deep conflict in the Western socio-political context. These centrist liberals' acknowledgement of the relative superiority of the West over China is not a reflection of what Lin calls "political beaconism." For Lin, "political beaconism" is a political misconception and a wrong-headed idealisation of Western politics. However, these centrist liberals' acknowledgement of the relative superiority of the West over China is not based upon their political misconceptions but complies with political and economic realities. Various indexes based on statistics and empirical studies have proved Western countries are relatively better than China in terms of human development, clean politics and economic equality. For instance, China is only ranked 85th in the 2022 Human Development Index by the United Nations Development Programme and 42nd in the 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, staying behind all major Western democracies (United Nations Human Development Programme, 2022; Transparency International, 2020). China's Gini coefficient, a measurement of economic inequality, was 38.5 in 2016, slightly lower than the United States (41.4), but higher than most European countries (World Bank 2022). However, as is previously discussed, while praising the relative strengths of Western politics, these centrist Chinese liberal intellectuals are not blindly glorifying, but drawing upon Confucianism and their theoretical agency to make critical reflections upon both Western leftist and rightist theories and political realities. This centrist tendency is also reflected in their critiques of Trump and the increasingly polarised Western politics.

### **Centrist Liberal Critics of Trump, American Politics and Western Democracy**

Compared with American liberals' partisan critique of Trump, many leading Chinese liberal intellectuals are centrist critics. While they have more criticisms of Trump and appreciate the American left's political correctness and identity politics, they also draw attention to the latter's excesses and failures to solve the disadvantaged groups' practical economic difficulties. These centrist critics do not impute the harms done by Trump to an individual or the right-wingers alone, but to the broad structural problems of Western political polarisation, partisan politics and uneven globalisation. This centrist critique runs

throughout Trump's rise and fall in American politics. Liu Qing (2018), a liberal professor of political philosophy, condemned not only Trump's vulgar character, but also his thinly veiled racial nationalism that undermined the traditional grounding of American identity upon liberal principles and ideals instead of race and ethnicity. However, Liu did not attribute Trump's destructive influence to his individual demagoguery alone. Instead, he also blamed the American left for their overemphasis on "identity politics" at the expense of "civic politics" that cost them appeal to the larger electorate (Liu, 2018: 9–25).

Tao Dongfeng (2017), a prominent liberal cultural critic, draws upon political theorists Isaiah Berlin and Richard Wolin to argue that both right-wing and left-wing populist authoritarianism could be traced back to modern and postmodern anti-enlightenment thinkers (Joseph Maistre, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Georges Bataille, Paul de Man, and Michele Foucault) that undermined beliefs in rationality and objectivity and fuelled personality cult that crosses the left and right ideological spectrum. Tao insists that Chinese intellectuals should "transcend the left versus right intellectual polarities and explore the common anti-enlightenment intellectual origins that underlie both far-right and far-left positions." However, Tao emphasises that he is less optimistic than Wolin in that although the anti-enlightenment postmodernism has receded, the emergence of Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and Brexit indicates the rise of extreme right-wing populist authoritarianism that could degenerate into totalitarianism and fascism.

Similarly, Xu Jilin (2017) discloses Trump's nihilism, money worship and suppression of intellectual elites in the name of abstract general will behind his right-wing populism and market fundamentalism. Xu traces Trump's pernicious ideologies to the Russian American writer Ayn Rand whose "virtues of selfishness" have a legion of acolytes in the right-wing political classes. Yet, Xu also criticises the American left's expansion of political correctness into denigration of all early American history as a history entrenched in racism and colonialism. Xu (2020a) laments that "the political correctness that was originally intended to protect the minorities and promote mutual respect turned out to have deepened racial and ethnic conflict." During the 2020 campaign, Zi (2020) reproached Trump's attempt to deploy the federal armies to suppress the violence in BLM for violating the 1807 Insurrection Act of 1807, condemned his mishandling of COVID-19 and his pandering to his base and partisan interest instead of serving all Americans. Zi appreciates political correctness, but faults the far left's recent overemphasis on political correctness and affirmative action that tend to "blame people for whatever they say and do" (动辄得咎, *dongzhedejia*). Zi does not attribute the problems to Trump or a few rightist extremists, but to the trend of intensifying partisan politics and political polarisation that prioritise partisan interest over national interest. Right after the 2020 presidential election, Qin (2020) gave a talk at the liberals' "Gongshi Salon" (共识沙龙, *gongshi shalong*) to denounce Trump's refusal to accept the defeat, and violation of constitutional norms. Moreover, Qin takes the Trumpian phenomenon as a springboard to discuss the broad structural problems of Western electoral democracy and financial internationalisation. He insists that to maintain financial balance and develop state

capacity, the conventional right-wing government is supposed to cut tax and lower welfare while the conventional left-wing government to raise tax and increase welfare. However, the growing neoliberal financial internationalisation and borrowing allow the right-wing government to cater to the voters by cutting tax but not lowering social welfare and the left-wing government by increasing social welfare but not raising the tax. As a result, the deficit is mounting and state capacity is undermined regardless of whether the right-wing or the left-wing party hold power. The deteriorating economic conditions produced the hotbed of Trumpian populism. Obviously, Qin oversimplifies the economic and political changes of Western democracies. However, his critique indicates his efforts to rise above the established right- and left-wing politics and explore the common inherent defects in Western electoral democracy and financial globalisation.

Then, what informed Chinese liberal intellectuals more centrist than a partisan critique of Trump? The immediate answer is the pursuit of academic neutrality. Most of the aforementioned centrist critics of Trump are academic public intellectuals from prestigious Chinese universities. The academic neutrality required by their profession as scholars and professors would restrain them from taking a purely one-sided partisan position on American politics. However, these scholars and professors are not free from their liberal political agendas and ideological underpinnings. We need to understand their centrist criticism of Trump and American politics beyond the mere pursuit of academic neutrality and explore their complicated political psychology, political tactics, and ideological origins.

As is discussed in the previous section, Chinese liberal intellectuals generally think that despite their inherent flaws and internal debate, both the Western mainstream left and right political governments and parties do much better than China's authoritarian party-state in terms of overall political democracy, economic equality, and protection of basic human rights. This recognition of China's relative political backwardness keeps Chinese liberal intellectuals from siding only with the American left-wing in making a partisan attack against Trump or with the right-wing in defending Trump. Instead, they view both the Western established right and left as democratic forces that Chinese liberals should get united with to facilitate China's democratic transition. Taking sides with either the established left or the established right will do no good to China's democratic cause. For instance, Zhang Qianfan (2020) levels the charge that Chinese Trump supporters' joining the American right in attacking Biden and democrats will cost Chinese liberals half of their political allies. Therefore, in terms of political tactics, Chinese liberals should not get too much involved in American partisan politics but work with both the established right and the left to oppose the authoritarian Chinese government.

However, while opposing the domestic authoritarian party-state and favouring Western democracy, Chinese liberal intellectuals still seek to preserve a Chinese national and cultural identity. What they pursue is not simply to copy Western liberalism but create a Chinese liberalism that is grounded in the Chinese historical and cultural context. They are worried that identifying themselves with particular American political parties' ideologies would deprive themselves of their Chinese

national and cultural identity. Therefore, despite their harsh critiques of Trump, they are reluctant to unreservedly identify with the American left. As Zhang Taisu (2020), a Yale-based legal scholar who often criticises Trump in his Sina micro blog, confesses that “I do not take side in the American presidential election no matter how I disdain and feel disgusted at a particular candidate.” The reason for his centrist detachment has nothing to do with the Chinese government’s official rhetoric of non-interference with other countries’ domestic affairs, nor simply out of his pursuit of academic neutrality, but with the purpose of “preserving my political and cultural identity as a Chinese person” (T. Zhang, 2020). Like Zhang, many other liberal critics of Trump, such as Zi Zhongyun, Qin Hui, Zhang Qianfan, and Xu Zhangrun, are also unwilling to criticise Trump only from the American leftist liberal perspective, because such a partisan position would make them indistinguishable from the American left, lose their Chinese identity and harm China’s national interest in the long term. Instead, they called for looking at American politics with critical detachment, or, in Zi’s (2009) words, “cast a cold eye on the other side of the ocean” (冷眼向洋, *lěnyan xiangyang*). Rather than making a partisan and personal attack, they situate the Trump phenomenon into the broad American political context and use it as an opportunity to reflect upon the relative achievements and defects of American politics and Western democracy from which Chinese liberal intellectuals can learn to plan and promote a more robust and healthier democracy for China’s future. For instance, at the very beginning of Trump’s rapid rise in American politics in 2016, Xu Zhangrun (2016) delivered a talk at the well-known liberal think-tank Unirule Institute of Economics (天则经济研究所, *tianze jingji yanjiusuo*) in which Xu calls on Chinese intellectuals to be calmly and analytically observing and learning from the 2016 American election about how American democracy works and what its pros and cons are, and what impact it could exert to the world and China, how China should respond. While praising American democracy for its effective prevention of the absolute autocrats and dictators from seizing power, Xu criticised the vicious personal attacks in partisan politics and cautioned against the transplanting of the American political system to China. He proposed addressing the excesses of Western electoral democracy by modifying it with some Confucian meritocracy, and implementing a hybrid model of Western democracy and Confucian meritocracy, namely, “sovereignty belongs to the people while governance to the virtuous elite” (主权在民 治权在贤, *zhuquan zai min zhiquan zai xian*) (Z. Xu, 2016). Contemporary mainland Chinese liberal intellectuals’ adherence to Chinese identity is not something *de novo* but a continuation of overseas liberal intellectuals and New Confucians’ (e.g. Hu Shih, Fu Sinian, Xu Fuguan, Tang Junyi, and Mou Zongsan) insistence on the preservation of their Chinese cultural identity. Contemporary mainland liberal emphasis on maintaining Chinese cultural identity while thinking through what China should learn from the West’s positive and negative political experience to create a better political future belongs to a long-established modern intellectual genealogy, one that runs through traditionalism and liberalism in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the overseas Chinese world.

As is discussed in the last section, post-Tiananmen liberal intellectuals developed Confucian-inspired critical reflections on Western liberal democracy, which can satisfy their desire to preserve national identity and pursue a better political future for China. As Liu (2012: 103) contends:

Always referring to America as criteria risks the loss of Chinese subjectivity and harming of our national self-esteem....We need to rethink our conceptions of democracy, rule of law, livelihood, human rights and civil society and reconstruct our values, moral principles and political imagination on the basis of our own historical tradition. This is the task of appeal to Chinese subjectivity. No matter how “primitive” our stage of development is right now, we should set a standard above American standard.

What Liu means by “our own historical tradition” refers mostly to Confucian tradition. Confucianism itself features “the doctrine of the mean” that opposes various extremist politics and ethics (Reischauer and Fairbank, 1960: 70–72). The centrist instead of partisan criticism of Trump and Western democracy is not only consistent with liberal intellectuals’ goal of advancing China’s democratisation but also with Confucianism’s internal thinking mode and political orientation. No wonder the centrist approach becomes many leading liberal intellectuals’ approach to American politics and Western democracy. For instance, on the eve of the 2020 American election, Zhang Qianfan (2020) urged Chinese liberals to take a Confucian-style “constitutional middle-way politics” in which different persons are assumed to be rational, able to express their different opinions, respect each other, and make compromises to reach social contract. Zhang’s call for middle-way politics is not a form of middle ground fallacy, that is, the pursuit of truth and justice by simply taking the middle ground of any two opposite positions. Instead, he emphasises that the resolution of political debate and conflict must be anchored upon the fixed principles of the social contract, constitutional democracy and natural political law. Qin (2020) is also aware that his centrist position may be subject to the criticism of the middle ground fallacy. Therefore, he insists that while taking an issue with both the Western left and right, he does not mean the middle ground between any left and right stances must be correct. Instead, he holds that the basic human right to be free from coercion can never be violated.

Chinese liberal intellectuals’ centrist criticism of Trump and American politics not only results from their political tactics, and Confucian and nationalist sympathies but also indicates the complicated impacts of modern China’s historical traumas. Scholars and political analysts attribute Chinese liberal intellectuals’ political misconceptions and liberal Trumpian fans’ political bias against the American left to the traumas they suffered under the ultra-left Maoist policies and political movements (J. Li, 2017; Lin, 2020; Q. Zhang, 2020). However, what these scholars and political analysts ignore is that Chinese liberal critics of Trump also deploy the Cultural Revolution as a frame of reference to understand and criticise the Trumpian craze. They analogise Trumpian far-right authoritarian populism to Maoist far-left populism, Trump’s ardent Chinese fans to Mao’s brainwashed red guards (Fu, 2018; Hao, 2020). Xu Jilin (2020) went a step



further to emphasise that the authoritarian populism could be associated with both the left-wing (such as Leninism and Maoism) and the right-wing political forces (Hitler and Trump), both of which crack down on dissenting ideas and forces in the name of “abstract general will” (公意, *gongyi*). We can learn from the liberal critics of Trumpian populism that the legacy of the Maoist disasters and horrors is complicated. It has not only produced Trump’s Chinese liberal fans’ irrational projection of Maoist ultra-leftist politics into all leftist progressive policies and movements, but also developed liberal critics’ vigilance and antipathy against all forms of authoritarian populism regardless of whether it is left-wing or right-wing. While these liberal intellectuals’ analogising of the Western populist movements to the Chinese Cultural Revolution may fail to capture the distinctive features and processes of each populist movement, it at least indicates that the Maoist horrors and disasters have not only led to Chinese intellectuals’ political misconceptions and biases, but also fostered their political sensitivity to any populist authoritarianism that disrespects the diversity of public opinions. As Xu Youyu (1999: 228–232) points out, the Cultural Revolution is a catastrophe, but it is also an enlightenment for Chinese intellectuals, for the experiences of the disasters caused by the political frenzies and personal cult during the Cultural Revolution fostered their independent thinking and critical attitude towards any authoritarian political authorities.

### **The Pre-PRC Liberal and Liberal-Leaning Intellectuals’ Learning from Sobering Reality**

In analysing contemporary Chinese intellectuals’ and internet users’ discussions on Chinese tradition and global politics, scholars have found and criticised their racism, social Darwinism and west-centrism, and attributed these obnoxious ideologies to the traumatic modern Chinese historical experience and the resultant damaged modern Chinese intellectual tradition (Cheng, 2011; Hao, 2020; Lin 2020). It is true that the humiliating defeats by the Western powers made Chinese intellectuals painfully recognise the harsh realities of power-based international politics, and impelled them to learn whatever from the West to empower and modernise China to compete on the jungle of the international stage. Moreover, the era of their intensive learning from the West in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century happened to be the heyday of colonialism, scientific racism, social Darwinism and west-centrism. However, this temporal parallel does not follow that all Chinese intellectuals must have unthinkingly internalised these pernicious ideologies and believed in the white supremacism and the social Darwinist conception of domestic politics and international relations. This widely received account of modern Chinese intellectual history as a process of internalising Western fin-de-siècle colonialism, racism and social Darwinism is too simplistic to note the pro-West modern Chinese liberal(-leaning) intellectuals’ inheritance of native Confucian tradition, reception of subsequent Western

progressive thoughts, their complicated learning from history, and their critical reflections on Western political realities and institutions.

The widely received intellectual narrative has it that: Chinese intellectuals underwent three stages in learning from the West: learning technology after The First Opium War (1839–1842), institutions after The First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), and culture from the New Culture Movement (1910s–1920s). However, recent studies of Chinese intellectual history show that it was not from the 1910s but from The First Opium War that the reform-minded officials and liberal-leaning intellectuals, such as Xu Jiyu, Guo Songtao, Liu Xihong, Xue Fucheng, and Wang Tao were attracted to the West not only by its military and economic power, but also by its political ideals and realities. They were surprised to find that the Confucian ideals of equality and civility were more realised in Western societies than in the Qing Dynasty (Qin, 2015: 19–34). While criticising Western hegemony in dealing with international relations, they spoke highly of the Western ordinary people's orderly and active participation in the discussion on public affairs. They thought the West could defeat China not just because of its superior military might but also because of its democratic domestic politics. In other words, for these early reform-minded and liberal-leaning Chinese intellectuals and officials, the modern world is not an anarchical jungle dominated solely by the logic of survival of the strongest but also a world in which the democratic country could triumph over the brutal and the hierarchical country. Modern international competition between nations was not so much a competition of power as a competition of justice and virtue. To catch up with the West and rejuvenate the Chinese civilisation, China should not only increase its economic and military power, but also make its politics and society more just and democratic.

This adherence to political idealism persisted into the late 1890s when China was defeated by Japan. Yan Fu is considered as father of Chinese liberalism. He was the first Chinese intellectual who systematically translated and introduced Western liberal classics ranging from Adam Smith to Stuart Mill. Meanwhile, he is often criticised for his misinterpretation and mis-popularisation of Thomas Huxley's ethics as a socialist Darwinist doctrine of "survival of the fittest" (物竞天择 适者生存, *wujingtianze shizheshengcun*) after the First Sino-Japan War. However, intellectual historians have corrected this simplistic characterisation of Yan as a social Darwinist thinker and populariser. Based on close reading of Yan's works, they have found the complexity and ambiguity in Yan's thought. On the one hand, Yan believed in "the logic of power" (强权的逻辑, *qiangquan de luoji*) in international competition. On the other hand, influenced by Confucian ethics, Yan also underscores "the heavenly principle of good and evil" (天道的善恶, *tiandao de shan'e*) (Q. Li, 2008; Z. Wang, 2008: 188–227). Intellectual historian Wang Hui argues that Yan's promotion of "survival of the fittest" is intended less to justify the colonial powers' domination of the colonised and the exploitation of the weak by the strong than to impel the complacent Chinese people and government for immediate self-strengthening and self-survival. Yan repeatedly emphasised that "the enlightened people and country should never use their power and might to humiliate and invade others." Yan called for the establishment of "public principle and law" (公

理和公法, *gongli he gongfa*) between different peoples and countries by which to form “public opinion” (公论, *gonglun*) and mediate international conflict (H. Wang, 2004: 872–911). Yan did admire Western political ideals, but this does not lead to his sanitised and glorified imageries of Western political and social realities. His lived experience in the UK made him acutely aware of the gap between Western political ideals of justice and equality and harsh realities of economic monopoly, widening wealth gap at home and brutal colonial expansion abroad.

As more Chinese intellectuals went to the West and gained more first-hand experience in Western societies since the late nineteenth century, they were more aware of the systemic problems within Western politics and developed more complex understandings of Western liberal democracy. For instance, the prominent reform-minded intellectual Kang Youwei warmly praised America’s Bill of Rights and democratic election for fulfilling ordinary citizens’ civil rights in his early career. However, since his exile after the 1898 Hundred Days’ Reform, he lived in different Western countries for more than a decade and witnessed the excesses of capitalism and moral degradation (Yang, 1996: 52–54). Kang’s student Liang Qichao followed his teacher’s transition from glorification to a more rational and balanced analysis of Western politics and society. In his *Travel Notes in the New Continent* (新大陆游记, *xindalu youji*) Liang (2007) speaks highly of the importance of a democratic system and civil rights to America’s prosperity while also criticising its intensified economic inequality caused by the monopoly of corporate trust, the excessive power of the legislature, the spoils system and the vicious partisan politics. While heatedly debating over whether the Western constitutional monarchy or the Western republican system is more appropriate for China, both Kang and Liang and the more radical liberal revolutionaries like Sun Yat-Sen and Zhang Taiyan were neither uncritical west-centrists nor fanatic nationalists. Instead, they formed complex and ambivalent attitudes towards the West. On the one hand, they praised the Western democratic system for its effective prevention of autocratic usurpation of power. On the other hand, they lamented its failure to tackle plutocracy, economic monopoly and social inequality (for a detailed account of fin-de-siècle Chinese intellectuals and government officials’ complex perceptions of American society and politics, see Yang 1996). It is this both appreciative and critical attitude towards Western politics that drove the liberal revolutionaries to draw upon but not blindly transplant the American political system and the libertarian economic policies to China. The most notable example is the establishment of the “Principle of Welfare Rights” (民生主义, *minsheng zhuyi*) and “Five-Power Constitution” (五权宪法, *wuquan xianfa*) by the Republic of China. The former was intended to restrict capitalism and prevent the huge economic inequality in the West from being repeated in China. The latter did not copy America’s tripartite separation of powers, but added the Confucian-style “Supreme Election Tribunal” (考试院, *kaoshiyuan*) and “Controller General” (监察院, *jianchayuan*) to solve the problems of plutocracy and hegemony of the legislature in Western democracies. As one scholar remarks, the establishment of the “Five-Power Constitution [...] represents an attempt to assimilate Western constitutional design models within local socio-political contexts requiring alterations to such designs” (Caldwell, 2020: 1).

However, the state power established by liberal revolutionaries was soon seized by military dictators. A new generation of Republican liberal intellectuals, such as Hu Shi, Luo Longji, Zhang Dongsun, Chu Anping, and Wang Zaoshi who returned from studying abroad in Japan, the USA, and Europe, came to be major liberal voices in the intellectual arena since the New Culture Movement. Their study abroad in the 1910s and 1920s coincided with the decline of laissez-faire liberalism and the rise of modern liberalism and socialism that rejected unfettered economic competition in favour of state intervention to solve the rampant economic inequalities and social injustices. At that time, capitalism developed rapidly in China and soon its negative consequences were exposed. Marxism and Russian socialism as radical solutions to libertarian capitalism were introduced. Chinese liberal intellectuals were ambivalent towards these conflicting Western ideologies. On the one hand, they appreciated classical liberalism's emphasis on individual freedom and opposition to state oppression, but because of the Confucian egalitarian influence, they could not tolerate the wealth chasm caused by laissez-faire liberalism. Therefore, they admired the socialist ideals of economic equality and social justice, but worried about the authoritarian tendency in Russian socialism (for a detailed discussion on Republican Chinese liberal intellectuals' social democratic thoughts, see Fung 2010). The European social democratism that endeavoured to reconcile socialism and capitalism, and achieve both political freedom and economic equality seemed to be able to address Chinese liberal intellectuals' dilemma. Then no wonder that social democratism was well received by Chinese liberal intellectuals and became "the mainstream of modern Chinese liberalism" (J. Xu, 1997: 29). Luo Longji, a former student of Harold Laski (the British political theorist with socialist sympathies and a leading figure in the social-democratic Fabian Society), worked with other progressive liberal intellectuals (Liang Shiqiu, Ding Xilin, Ye Gongchao, and Xu Zhimo) to form Ping She (平社), a Chinese version of the British Fabian Society, in the late 1920s to study the Western democratic socialism and its relevance to China (Shen 1996: 71–75; J. Xu, 1998: 13–20). Ping She members and other progressive liberal intellectuals like Zhan Junmei, Chu Anping and Xiao Qian struggled against the Northern warlords' and KMT's dictatorial regimes and advocated individualism in socio-political affairs while supporting active state intervention in economic affairs to redress severe economic inequality and injustice in the Republican era.

Afterwards, the American government's aid to China's War of Resistance against Japanese aggression during World War II won broad praise among Chinese liberal intellectuals. Nevertheless, the later American armies' brutality in China, the American government's pressure on the KMT government to open the Chinese market and make China into the dumping place for American products, and its use of China as an anti-Soviet Union instrument instead of sincerely helping to solve Chinese people's actual socio-economic problems aroused liberal intellectuals' harsh criticisms, and revised their overwhelmingly positive image of America formed during the World War II (M. Wang, 2002: 51–56). These Chinese liberal intellectuals were indeed appreciative of Western liberal ideals and political institutions. However, this appreciation did not translate into a blind glorification of American political realities and actual foreign policies. Instead,

they were able to correct their misconceptions and idealisations by learning from the sobering political realities and the American government's actual hegemonic practices. Instead of blindly following America or the Soviet Union, KMT or CCP, capitalism or socialism, Chinese liberal intellectuals generally sought for "a third way" (第三条道路, *disantiao daolu*) that is, struggling for both individual freedom and economic equality, learning from Western democracies while criticising their hegemonic policies, and protecting China's reasonable national interest and identity (Fung, 2010: 251–253).

At the height of Chinese intellectual debate in the late 1990s, leading Chinese liberal intellectuals, such as Qin Hui, Xu Jiling and Liu Qing, rebuked extreme economic liberal intellectuals' obsession with economic efficiency and unbridled market while also questioning the New Left's indiscriminate anti-capitalism and anti-market position without a due critique of the party-state's authoritarian political system. Xu Jilin (1999) contends that Chinese intellectuals "must develop moderate and centrist forces between the two polarities of liberalism and the New Left, namely, a new liberalism and a new social democratism that take both liberty and equality into consideration." Xu argues that only when such moderate and centrist forces become the intellectual mainstream can China "avoid previous radicalization and polarization and pursue a 'non-left and non-right' third-road that balances passion and reason" (p. 79). Both Qin (1999: 129) and Xu Jilin (1997: 35) use the Republican liberal intellectuals' thoughts and practices as a native and historical precedent to justify the possibility of a moderate and centrist third road beyond the conventional right and the left. Their current centrist critical reflections on Trump and the increasingly polarised Western politics could be considered as a continuation of the Republican liberal intellectuals' moderate centrism.

## Conclusion

As is mentioned at the very beginning, this article does not seek to disavow the neoliberal, racist, social Darwinist and west-centric dimensions of contemporary Chinese liberalism, nor to deny these pernicious ideologies are the fundamental causes of some liberals' Trump idolisation and political misconceptions as Lin and other scholars argue, but only to point out that they do not tell a whole story. By exploring the critics of Trump, this article aims to demonstrate the other side of contemporary Chinese liberalism, and bring to light the ignored Confucian, social democratic and dialogical dimensions of modern Chinese intellectual tradition and the complicated impacts of the traumatising modern Chinese history upon Chinese liberal intellectuals. This article argues that many leading Chinese liberal intellectuals are not taking side with the American liberal left in making all-out partisan critiques of Trump or with the American conservative right in defending Trump, but are centrist critics. They are simultaneously critical and appreciative of both American right and left, American political realities, and more broadly, Western liberal democracy and Chinese tradition. Their centrist and non-partisan position is not only derived from their pursuit of academic neutrality but also from their political tactics, preservation of Chinese identity and perfection of China's national conditions. From their critical reflections on Trump, American politics, Western liberal

democracy and the lessons that China can learn from history, we can see these leading Chinese liberal intellectuals are neither unthinking west-centrists nor fanatic jingoists/revanchists but moderate and dialogical nationalists seeking for a Chinese-style liberalism and a better China that is based upon consideration of relative strengths and weaknesses of Western democracy and Chinese tradition.

The limitation of this research is obvious. The liberal critics of Trump examined here are mostly academic public intellectuals working for the Chinese elite universities and research institutes and cannot represent all Chinese liberals that include less academic journalists, netizens and activists among whom supporters of Trump and Trumpian ideologies do exist. The exact percentages and clusterings of Chinese liberals' different perceptions of Trump and Western politics remain to be discovered by more nuanced quantitative research. However, the liberal critics of Trump discussed here are all influential liberal intellectuals that have played and will be likely to play an important role in Chinese discursive politics and China's democratic development. Their centrist critical opinions on Trump, American politics and Western democracy are worth Western China scholars' and policymakers' attention. Moreover, as many scholars have argued, Chinese liberals' idolisation of Trump is derived from their political misconceptions. Political psychology tells us that political misperceptions are more likely to be corrected by people from the same ideological and social camp (Flynn and Brendan, 2017: 127–150). Both Chinese liberal critics and fans of Trump are from the same Chinese liberal camp in the sense that they share the pro-West and anti-authoritarian position. This article's exploration of the Chinese liberal critics of Trump could serve as a corrective to Trump's Chinese fans' misconceptions of their liberal fellows. Finally, extreme ideologies and political polarisation have gained momentum and been well researched. Little attention has been paid to the political moderates or centrists who are vital to the stabilisation of democracy and modern welfare system (Gidron and Ziblatt, 2019: 17–35). As is shown above, most Chinese liberal critics of Trump are centrist liberals. While they have not formulated rigorous and systematic liberal theories, their critical thinking, willingness to hear both the left and the right voices and vigilance against any forms of populism and middle ground fallacy are praiseworthy. Democracy and freedom cannot materialise across the globe without China's participation and contribution. Listening to these ignored centrist liberal voices from the most populous country is of particular significance in the context of the robust liberal democracy threatened by the rise of extremist political forces and discourses.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Caldwell, Ernest (2020) Chinese constitutionalism: five-power constitution. In: *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Comparative Constitutional Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cheng, Yinghong (2011) From campus racism to cyber racism: discourse of race and Chinese nationalism. *China Quarterly* 207: 561–579.
- Davies, Gloria (2007) *Worrying About China: The Language of Chinese Critical Inquiry*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Deng, Yuwen 邓聿文 (2020) 中国自由主义群体因美大选分裂 [Chinese liberals split because of American election]. 德国之声 [*Deutsche Welle*], November 10.
- Deng, Zhenglai 邓正来 (2005) 哈耶克批判的前提性准备 [Preparation for the critique of Hayek]. 爱思想 [*Love Thought*], August 12. Available at: <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/8135.html> (accessed 10 October 2021)
- Flynn, DJ and Nyhan Brendan (2017) The nature and origins of misperceptions: understanding false and unsupported beliefs about politics. *Political Psychology* 38: 127–150.
- Fu, Zhibin 傅志彬 (2018) 川普的美国与红卫兵的中国 [Trump's America and Red Guards' China]. 傅志彬的文章 [Fu Zhibin's Articles], December 2. Available at: <https://fuzhibin.blogspot.com/2020/10/1989200478-80blm-20178.html> (accessed 8 November 2020).
- Fung, Edmund (2010) *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity: Cultural and Political Thought in the Republican Era*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gao, Gengsong (2021) Post-Tiananmen Chinese liberal intellectuals' political uses of Confucian tradition and Chinese history. *Journal of Contemporary China* 29 (November): 1–17.
- Gidron, Noam, and Daniel Ziblatt (2019) Center-right political parties in advanced democracies. *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 17–35.
- Gray, John (1995) *Liberalism*, 2nd ed. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hao, Zhidong 郝志东 (2020) 川普化的知识分子和他们眼中的白左 [Trumpian intellectuals and white left in their eyes]. 金融时报中文版 [*Financial Times*], July 1.
- He, Weifang 贺卫方 (2021) 中国语境下的大撕裂 [Big split in the Chinese context]. 思想 [*Reflexion*] 42.
- Huters, Theodore (2005) *Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China*. Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Li, Dan 李丹 (2014) 中国左翼自由主义的香港共识 [The Hong Kong consensus of Chinese left-wing liberalism]. 澎湃 [*Pengpai*], August 6. Available at: <https://www.gongfa.com/html/gongfaxinwen/201408/06-2649.html> (accessed 12 September 2020).
- Li, Junpeng (2017). *The making of liberal intellectuals in post-Tiananmen China*. Dissertation, Columbia University.
- Li, Qiang 李强 (2008) 严复与中国近代的思想转型 [Yan Fu and modern Chinese intellectual transformation]. 爱思想 [*Love Thought*], September 23. Available at: <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/20978.html> (accessed 12 July 2020).
- Li, Yuan (2019) Donald Trump, China savior? Some Chinese say yes. *New York Times*, April 16.
- Liang, Qichao 梁启超 (2007) 新大陆游记 [*Travel Notes in the New Continent*]. Beijing: 中国社会科学出版社 [China Social Sciences Press].
- Lin, Yao (2020) Beaconism and the Trumpian metamorphosis of Chinese liberal intellectuals. *Journal of Contemporary China* 127(30): 85–101.
- Liu, Qing 刘擎 (2006) 柏林与自由民族主义 [Berlin and liberal nationalism]. 社会学研究 [*Sociological Studies*] 2: 176–180.

- Liu, Qing 刘擎 (2012) 离开美国我们就无法思考吗 [Are we unable to think without America]. 南风窗 [South Reviews] 2: 103.
- Liu, Qing 刘擎 (2018) 西方社会的政治极化及其对自由民主制的挑战 [Political polarization in Western societies and its challenge to liberal democracy]. 知识分子论丛 [Intellectual Series] 1: 9–25
- Meng, Bingchun (2018) *The Politics of Chinese Media: Consensus and Contestation*. New York: Springer.
- Peng, Altman Yuzhu (2020) Boris Johnson in hospital: a Chinese gaze at Western democracies in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Media International Australia* 177(1): 76–91.
- Qin, Hui 秦晖 (1999) 问题与主义 [Problems and Isms]. Changchun: 长春出版社 [Changchun Publishing House].
- Qin, Hui 秦晖 (2002) 开启西儒融汇的新路 [Opening a new path for the fusion of Western theories and Confucianism]. 战略与管理 [Strategy and Management] 30(4): 104–118.
- Qin, Hui 秦晖 (2013) 共同的底线 [The Common Bottom Line]. Nanjing: 江苏文艺出版社 [Jiangsu Phoenix Art Publishing House Co., Ltd].
- Qin, Hui 秦晖 (2015) 重论大五四的主调及其如何被压倒 [Reexamining the big may fourth movement's leitmotif and why it was overridden]. 二十一世纪 [Twenty First Century] 8:19–34.
- Qin, Hui 秦晖 (2020) 也谈美国大选 [On American general election], December 3. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skJBIDd1-gU> (accessed 25 January 2021).
- Reischauer, Edwin, and John K. Fairbank (1960) *East Asia: The Great Tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Shen, Weiwei 沈卫威 (1996) 中国式的费边社议政 [Chinese-style Fabian society's political discussion]. 史学月刊 [Journal of Historical Science] 2: 71–75.
- Tang, Xiaobing, and Mark Mcconaghy (2018) Liberalism in contemporary China: questions, strategies, directions. *China Information* 32(1): 121–138.
- Tao, Dongfeng 陶东风 (2017) 法西斯主义的思想根源及其超越 [The intellectual origin of Fascism and its transcendence]. 爱思想 [Love Thought], March 14. Available at: <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/20978.html> (accessed 3 October 2021).
- Teng, Biao 滕彪 (2020) 为什么支持民主的人应该反对川普 [Why should those who support democracy oppose Trump]. *Matters*, December 6. Available at: <https://matters.news/@tengbiao> (accessed 3 February 2021).
- Transparency International (2020) Corruption perception index. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020> (accessed 18 February 2022).
- United Nations Human Development Programme (2022) Human development report. Available at: <https://hdrundp.org/en/content/latest-human-development-index-ranking> (accessed 18 February 2022).
- Wang, Hui 汪晖 (2004) 中国现代思想的兴起 [The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought]. Beijing: 三联书店 [Joint Publishing].
- Wang, Mingxing 王明星 (2002) 十字街头的理性评 [Rational judgement at the crossroad]. 东方文化 [Oriental Culture] 1: 51–56.
- Wang, Zhongjiang 王中江 (2008) 近代中国思维方式演变的趋势 [Trend of Modern Chinese Mode of Thinking]. Chengdu: 四川人民出版社 [Sichuan People's Press].
- Wong, Wai-hung 王伟雄 (2016) 支持特朗普的哲学家 [Philosophers supporting Trump]. 明报 [Mingpao], November 6.
- World Bank (2022) Gini index. Available at: [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?name\\_desc=false&locations=CN](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?name_desc=false&locations=CN) (accessed 18 February 2022).
- Xu, Jilin 许纪霖 (1997) “现代中国的自由主义传统” [Modern China's liberal tradition]. 二十一世纪 [Twenty-first Century] 42: 27–35.



- Xu, Jilin 许纪霖 (1998) 社会民主主义的历史遗产 [Historical legacy of social democratism]. 开放时代 [Open Times] 4: 13–20.
- Xu, Jilin 许纪霖 (1999) 寻求第三条道路-关于自由主义和新左翼的对话 [In search of third road: dialogue between liberalism and new left]. 上海文学 [Shanghai Literature] 3: 68–79.
- Xu, Jilin 许纪霖 (2012) 儒家宪政的现实与历史 [The history and reality of Confucian constitutionalism]. 开放时代 [Open Times] 1: 44–59.
- Xu, Jilin 许纪霖 (2014) 我是无法归类的蝙蝠 [I am an unclassifiable bat]. 爱思想 [Love Thought], April 22. Available at: <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/74173.html> (accessed 16 January 2021).
- Xu, Jilin (2018) *Rethinking China's rise: A liberal critique*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Xu, Jilin 许纪霖 (2020a) “特朗普: 民族至上的民粹保守主义” [Trump: nation supremacist populist conservatism]. 爱思想 [Love Thought], November 5. Available at: <http://m.aisixiang.com/data/123404.html> (accessed 3 February 2021).
- Xu, Jilin 许纪霖 (2020b) 特朗普灵魂中的女人 [The woman in Trump's soul], 爱思想 [Love Thought]. January 23. Available at: <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/102908.html> (accessed 3 February 2021).
- Xu, Youyu 徐友渔 (2003) “关于自由和平等的当代思考” [Contemporary reflections on freedom and equality]. 云南大学学报 [Journal of Yunnan University] 3: 3–10.
- Xu, Zhangrun 许章润 (2008) 思想者以思想发声 [Thinkers speak out with thoughts]. 南方人物周刊 [Southern People Weekly] 1: 82–85.
- Xu, Zhangrun 许章润 (2016). 衰落帝国的政治回归 [The declining empire's return of politics]. November 8. Available at: <http://unirule.cloud/index.php?c=article&id=4335> (accessed 7 December 2020).
- Xu, Zhangrun (2017) *The Confucian Misgivings: Liang Shu-ming's Narrative about Law*. Singapore: Springer.
- Yang, Yusheng 杨玉圣 (1996) 中国人的美国观: 一个历史的考察 [Chinese People's Views on America: A Historical Investigation]. Shanghai: 复旦大学出版社 [Fudan University Press].
- Zhang, Chenchen (2020) Right-wing populism with Chinese characteristics? Identity, otherness and global imaginaries in debating world politics online. *European Journal of International Relations* 26(1): 88–115.
- Zhang, Qianfan 张千帆 (2012) 为了人的尊严 [For the Sake of Human Dignity]. Beijing: 民主法制出版社 [Democracy and Law Press].
- Zhang, Qianfan 张千帆 (2020) 中西左右: 一场跨洋误会 [Left and right in China and the West: A trans-oceanic misunderstanding] 中国历史与未来 [China: History and Future] 10. Available at: <https://www.chinese-future.org/articles/9bebalsph4dz3eleflmpcwknf7bm> (accessed 8 February 2021).
- Zhang, Qianfan 张千帆, and Rong Wei 荣伟 (eds.) (2021a) 川普主义批判 [Critiques of Trumpism]. New York: 博登书屋 [Bouden House].
- Zhang, Qianfan 张千帆, and Rong Wei 荣伟 (eds.) (2021b) 极右思潮批判 [Critiques of Extreme Right Ideologies]. New York: 博登书屋 [Bouden House].
- Zhang, Qianfan 张千帆, and Rong Wei 荣伟 (eds.) (2021c) 民主政治思辨 [Reflections on Democratic Politics]. New York: 博登书屋 [Bouden House].
- Zhang, Taisu 张泰苏 (2020) 张泰苏的新浪微博 [Sina Microblog], November 11. Available at: [https://weibo.com/3912468185/JsguLpLLm?from=page\\_1005053912468185\\_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl\\_rnd=1611416692.9116&type=comment](https://weibo.com/3912468185/JsguLpLLm?from=page_1005053912468185_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1611416692.9116&type=comment) (accessed 3 March 2021).
- Zhao, Suisheng (2015) Rethinking the Chinese world order: the imperial cycle and the rise of China. *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(96): 961–982.

- Zi, Zhongyun 资中筠 (2002) 从‘社会达尔文主义’说起兼及中国国情 [Speaking of social Darwinism’ and Chinese national situation]. 社会科学论坛 [Social Science Forum] 9: 4–7.
- Zi, Zhongyun 资中筠 (2009) 冷眼向洋 [Cast a Cold Eye on the Other Side of the Ocean]. Beijing: 三联书店 [Joint Publishing].
- Zi, Zhongyun 资中筠 (2020) “妄议美国” [Casual comments on USA]. 财新博客 [Caixin Blog], June 29. Available at: <http://zizhongyun.blog.caixin.com/archives/230806#more> (accessed 12 February 2021).

### Author Biography

**Gengsong Gao** is currently an associate professor and Chinese program’s coordinator at the University of Richmond. He specialises in contemporary Chinese literature and intellectual discourse. His publications appeared in the journal of *The Journal of Contemporary China*, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *Intertexts: A Journal of Comparative and Theoretical Reflection* and *Neohelicon*.