

Interpretation

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The Reception of Leo Strauss in China: Two Chinese Straussians, between Theological Temptation and Political Criticism

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The point of departure of this article is a phenomenon specific to the recent intellectual history of China: the existence in the 2000s of what was called the “passion for Leo Strauss” (*Shitelaosi re* 施特劳斯热). This phenomenon is surprising to some extent, given the distance that seems to separate the historical context of a thinker such as Strauss and the current situation in China. Nevertheless, we may discern in it issues that go well beyond a transitory fashion.¹

This work presented many difficulties; two stumbling blocks in particular were to be avoided. The first was not to launch an inquiry into Strauss’s philosophical thought itself. It was not possible to investigate in this article to what extent Chinese readers interpreted the “true” thinking of Strauss “well” or “badly.” The second stumbling block was the danger of presenting only the most superficial aspect of this phenomenon by reducing it to a series of polemics, more or less relevant, among Chinese intellectuals and journalists. To these two stumbling blocks one may add another problem, owing to an essential characteristic of Strauss’s thought itself: the occasional lack

¹ I wish to express the greatest gratitude to Prof. Michel Espagne, who offered me the opportunity to write this article in French, to Prof. Timothy Burns for the patient review and publication of the present English version, and to Prof. Thomas Fröhlich of the University of Hamburg for his rereading and invaluable, precise suggestions, as well as to my master’s thesis director, Prof. Pierre Manent, and to the two members of the jury, the late Prof. Joël Thoraval and Prof. Jean-Claude Monod, for their suggestions on my master’s thesis, which is the basis of this article.

of clarity of Chinese writers commenting on Strauss, in line with Strauss's own tendency to hint at certain topics rather than explicitly explore them. In a word, it was difficult to know whether the Chinese commentaries on this cryptic thought were themselves...encrypted! It was possible to get lost in a hall of mirrors.

A limited number of studies of the Chinese reception of Strauss have been published in Western languages in recent years.² In the face of this research problem, the most fitting methodological procedure seems to be that of withholding any general judgment on the philosophical value of this phenomenon.³ We will take a more specifically anthropological approach to this study⁴—taking into account the experiences of Maoism and the Cultural Revolution, experiences that are very significant for the two most important Straussians. Given that this phenomenon of reception is characterized by the domination of two key characters, we will first examine the particular itinerary of each of the two Chinese “smugglers” of Straussian thought: Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫 and Gan Yang 甘阳.⁵ Only their life experience and their historical context give meaning to this singular encounter. In the second section of this article we will discuss several problematic translations in this

² Kai Marchal and Carl K. Y. Shaw, eds., *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the Chinese-Speaking World: Reorienting the Political* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017) gives an excellent multidisciplinary view of the reception of Leo Strauss in mainland China and Taiwan, along with that of Carl Schmitt, which occurred at the same time. We have only a few studies on this phenomenon available in French, as well as an article by Zhou Lian which has been translated into English, entitled “The Ephemeral and the Essential in Contemporary Chinese Political Philosophy,” *Diogenes*, no. 221 (2008): 170–83. The latter contains a section devoted to Liu Xiaofeng and the reception of Leo Strauss. We also have a translation by Joël Thoravel of an article by Liu Xiaofeng, “Leo Strauss et la Chine: Une rencontre autour de l’*ethos* classique” [“Shitelaosi yu zhongguo: gudian xinxing de xiangfeng” 施特劳斯与中国: 古典心性的相逢], *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*, no. 31 (2009): 141–54, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-extreme-orient-extreme-occident-2009-1-page-141.htm>.

³ We thus share the position adopted by most contributors to *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the Chinese-Speaking World*: “The Chinese and Taiwanese reception of Schmitt and Strauss needs to be understood both in the context of contemporary globalization and against the backdrop of China’s (and Taiwan’s) internal developments” (5). But we refrain from placing at the center of our inquiry, in contrast with Kai Marchal in the collection, the question of knowing “whether a true dialogue between Chinese civilization and Strauss has even begun” (12).

⁴ It seems to us that the studies in the above-mentioned collection on Leo Strauss’s reception in China adopt approaches to political studies or political philosophy. While we can give a very good account of the complexities of this phenomenon, we suggest that an anthropological approach is necessary, because it is difficult to know whether Chinese academics appropriate Leo Strauss to justify their own discourse without having a detailed understanding of their own background, dependent on the long historical and sociopolitical trauma of contemporary China.

⁵ For a detailed list of Chinese Straussians, see Kai Marchal, “Modernity, Tyranny, and Crisis: Leo Strauss in China,” in *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the Chinese-Speaking World*, 177–78.

reception of Strauss in Chinese; in the third section we will explore three lines of debate surrounding this reception.

1. TWO STRAUSSIANS OF IMPORTANCE: LIU XIAOFENG AND GAN YANG

A. COMPRESSED TIME FRAME OF THE RECEPTION

It can be observed that the first translation of Leo Strauss in China was made in 1985, as a result of a general interest in China about contemporary Western thinking, after three decades of relative isolation of the Chinese intellectual world. It was of Strauss's lecture "What Is Political Philosophy?" (the University of Jerusalem, 1954–1955), included in the book *Contemporary Political Thought: Issues in Scope, Value, and Direction* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

The second translation in Chinese was of the book coedited by Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1963), translated in 1993. Although this book was included a little later on the list of secondary reference books intended for political science students, at the same time as the translation of *A History of Political Theory* by George Sabine, no particular interest can be discerned yet in the thinking of Leo Strauss himself.

It was not until the 2000s that a true interest in Strauss himself emerged in continental China and Hong Kong, thanks to the effort of the renowned Chinese intellectual Professor Liu Xiaofeng. In the following section his profile and his work on Strauss will be presented in depth; we note here only that by virtue of the quantity and quality of his work on Strauss, he is in fact the most important Chinese Straussian and occupies the center of this reception.

In 2001, Liu published a first article, entitled "Ciwei de wenshun" 刺猬的温顺 (The docility of the hedgehog), based on his readings of Strauss in the late 1990s. It is noteworthy that his discovery of Strauss was mainly through Heinrich Meier's book *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

This article quickly aroused great interest in the thought of Strauss. At the very least, it gave shape, by accentuating it, to an interest already present in a number of Chinese intellectuals at the end of the 1990s, an interest that was waiting for the opportunity to express itself in a more visible and collective manner. Thus a rather large number of translations of articles by Strauss then saw the light of day. There first appeared, on the mainland and in Hong Kong,

a translation of his texts in two important journals, with different emphases. On the mainland side of China, the sixtieth number of *Commentaries on Academic Thought*, entitled “The Complexities of Western Modernity and Its Development,” devoted the second part of the issue to a translation without commentary of six extracts from works by Hannah Arendt. But the first part, dedicated to the thought of Strauss, was more substantial, since it consisted of a long introductory article by Liu Xiaofeng entitled “Shitelaosi de lubiao” 施特劳斯的标 (The marks of Strauss), translations of five articles by Strauss, a translation of Strauss’s introduction to the English edition of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, an extract from *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and a review article by Stanley Rosen.⁶

On the Hong Kong side, the journal that played a crucial role at the beginning of the reception was the one edited by Liu Xiaofeng: a journal of Christian theology titled *Daofeng: jidujiao wenhua pinglun* 道风: 基督教文化评论, or *Logos and Pneuma: Chinese Journal of Theology*, associated with the Institute of Chinese Studies in the Culture of Christianity. A dozen of Strauss’s articles were translated, including “Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections,” “Exoteric Teaching,” “How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy,” “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” and “On the Interpretation of Genesis.”

In 2002, Liu Xiaofeng was also responsible for the publication of a 775-page work titled *Shitelaosi yu gudian zhengzhi zhexue* 施特劳斯与古典政治哲学 (Leo Strauss and classical political philosophy). However, only two articles by Strauss were included: “A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss” (1970) and “German Nihilism” (1999); the remainder consisted of articles by American Straussians. After these translations, there appeared, between 2001 and 2011, translations of several important works of Strauss: *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (trans. 2001); *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (trans. 2004); a good part of the collection edited by Heinrich Meier, *Gesammelte Schriften* (trans. 2009); *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (trans. 2010); and above all *Natural Right and History* in 2002, with a preface by Gan Yang, the other important Chinese Straussian, whose path will be presented later.

Next, we may note a collection by Liu Xiaofeng published in 2011 titled *Shitelaosi de lubiao* 施特劳斯的标 (The marks of Strauss). This collection

⁶ Stanley Rosen, “The Golden Apple,” review of *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s “Phaedrus,”* by G. R. F. Ferrari, *Arion*, 3rd ser., 1, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 187–207.

included five of Liu's articles written between 1999 and 2009, including a slightly modified version of the first article, "The Docility of the Hedgehog," and the long introduction to the aforementioned journal issue devoted to Strauss.

A large-scale translation of Strauss's works was carried out between 2011 and 2013. In the collection *Hermès: Classiques et Commentaires*, begun in 2000, directed by Liu Xiaofeng, we see a subcollection devoted to Strauss.

Thus, it must be noted that the reception of Strauss did not really begin until the 2000s, almost twenty years ago. Nevertheless, most of Strauss's works, as well as many works by American Straussians, have been translated. In order to analyze this recent phenomenon, we suggest that we now concentrate on the two most important Chinese Straussians, Liu Xiaofeng and Gan Yang, to see how they discovered Strauss and how this discovery relates to their own intellectual interests as well as to the Chinese sociopolitical context.

B. INTELLECTUAL PORTRAIT OF LIU XIAOFENG: "CULTURAL CHRISTIAN"; "THE CHINA PROBLEM"; "TENSION BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON"—THE GERMAN READER OF STRAUSS

Understanding the thought of Liu Xiaofeng is not easy: first, because of the complexity of his path from the Cultural Revolution to his studies in Switzerland via the drama of Tiananmen Square; and then because of a sometimes disconcerting style of writing, which forces one to read very closely.

Liu Xiaofeng was born in 1956, in a village near the city of Chongqing, close to the province of Sichuan, in the Southwest of China. He studied for a BA in literature at the University of Sichuan between 1978 and 1982, followed by a master's degree in philosophy at the University of Peking between 1982 and 1985. After teaching in the Department of Chinese Literature at the University of Shenzhen between 1985 and 1989, Liu pursued doctoral studies in theology at the University of Basel between 1989 and 1993.

The Cultural Revolution began when Liu was in the third year of primary school. In a later work, with abundant jokes and bitterness he relates his life and studies from then until his departure for Peking and the master's program.⁷ We see the first years of Liu's life with a rural background close to the land, in a place which was isolated but rich in culture, at the crossroads of poverty and wealth in material and intellectual terms. And against this

⁷ Liu Xiaofeng, preface to *Geti xinyang yu wenhua lilun* 个体信仰与文化理论 [Individual faith and cultural theory] (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin, 1997), <http://www.aisixiang.com/data/47313.html> (accessed March 17, 2014).

backdrop, there were collective scenes of violence and absurdity, intertwined with a desire on Liu's part for knowledge and happiness, as well as the transmission of culture that was lost, broken, and found elsewhere. We may also note Liu's early interest in the Western novels of the classical period and his distaste for the so-called Chinese tradition, even if this was formed by the most renowned men of his native country.

Leaving Sichuan and arriving on the campus of the prestigious University of Peking in 1982, Lui pursued studies in aesthetics. But he quickly turned to philosophy—more precisely, to existential philosophy from Pascal to Kierkegaard and to Husserlian phenomenology—and then reoriented himself toward a dissertation on theology at the University of Basel, primarily focusing on Karl Barth.⁸ In this period between the 1980s and the early 1990s, Liu distinguished himself in the Chinese academic world with prominent publications and by his participation in intellectual debates.⁹

Liu became known in the Chinese academic world through his first publication, in 1982, titled *Shihua zhexue* 诗化哲学 (Poetic philosophy). Three years later, in 1985, Liu published his second work, *Zhengjiu yu xiaoyao* 拯救与逍遥 (Delivering and dallying, as Liu himself translated the title). This work of a young man of thirty-two years of age, having had his master's degree for only two years, was immediately greatly saluted by the academic world.

It is indeed difficult for us to imagine today such a significant success in the 1980s in China: in that decade, named “the fever of culture,” coming out of the ruins and confinement of knowledge which had lasted for ten years, intellectuals and young students alike embarked with the same enthusiasm on the search for happiness, meaning in life, knowledge, and the country's future. What we are used to classifying under disciplinary rubrics such as philosophy, literature, and theology, and on the other hand the radical life

⁸ He worked on his doctorate in theology between 1989 and 1993 at the University of Basel, his thesis being published in German a little later as *Personwerdung: Eine theologische Untersuchung zu Max Schelers Phänomenologie der “Person-Gefühle” mit besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner Kritik an der Moderne*, Basler und Berner Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie, no. 64 (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996).

⁹ In particular, he participated in the debate between those who support a “theology in Chinese language” (where language is above all an instrument, respecting the difference of the Gospel message) and those who instead support an “indigenous theology” (i.e., incorporating elements borrowed from the traditional Chinese language into theology). In the latter case, for example, the “Word” of the Gospel is translated by *Tao* (which means both voice and word).

choices and value judgments that we tend to maintain outside academic life, were confused during this period.¹⁰

The encounter with the thought of Strauss took place only after Liu's own complex of problems had been put into place. One finds, at the beginning of Liu's quest, two major questions, one that can be called "the Chinese problem" and the other relating to the claim of an identity as a "cultural Christian." In a certain way the second was the solution found in response to the first.

The Chinese problem refers to the crisis of legitimacy of Chinese thought and culture for more than a century in relation to the West.¹¹ Liu refused two easy paths: that of intellectual Westernization and that of cultural nationalism. He sought a point of view that would enable him to transcend the relativism of his contemporaries. This point of view is that of the absolute, which was revealed to him by the study of theology and Christian thought.

The study of Leo Strauss, conducted on his own, seemed to Liu in consonance with his own questions. His real encounter with Strauss came quite late, following his discovery of Meier's book on Schmitt, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*.¹² Later, Liu tells us that the primary purpose of his first article on Strauss was to bid farewell to the thinking of the Chinese and Western Enlightenments.¹³ This explanation still sounds too succinct, but we can consider only the importance of this statement: we have therefore to deal with a resolute *adversary* of the Chinese Enlightenment¹⁴ or of the Enlightenment itself. We note in passing that this is not the case with the other Chinese Straussian, Gan Yang.

¹⁰ Here we concur with the remark by Kai Marchal: "Liu's interests extend beyond theology or philosophy in the narrow academic sense" ("Modernity, Tyranny, and Crisis," 179).

¹¹ For a more general view, Carl K. Y. Shaw, "Toward a Radical Critique of Liberalism: Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in Contemporary Chinese Discourses," in Marchal and Shaw, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the Chinese-Speaking World*, 37–57, places the Chinese reception of Strauss "in the context of a political culture searching for new sources of legitimacy beyond liberal democracy, which is deemed a malaise of modernity" (introduction to *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss*, 9).

¹² Preface to *Shitelaosi de lubiao* 施特劳斯的路标 [The marks of Strauss] (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2011), i–ii.

¹³ Liu Xiaofeng's critical attitude towards political and intellectual liberalism seems to have been reinforced by his reading of Carl Schmitt, in addition to that of Leo Strauss. Schmitt's thinking provided Liu with another combination of theological questions about (Christian) truth in human history and the criticism of liberalism.

¹⁴ The expression "Chinese Enlightenment" (*qimeng* 启蒙) designates the new culture launched by the Movement of May 4, 1919, against traditional thought and for the critical ideas ("science and democracy") inspired by the modern West.

In fact, Liu's interest in Strauss cannot be reduced, as the received view in Chinese academia would have it, to an interest in the esoteric art of writing. Here we see Liu's interest in the Straussian political philosophy aimed at improving the Chinese academic world. Recalling the diverse currents of philosophical thought successively in vogue in China, Liu indicates the radical difference of Strauss's political philosophy: its capaciousness, covering almost the entire history of Western thought; its different fulcrum, which is the Socratic philosophical experience; and what that allows us to discover, which is the classical political philosophy of the West.

Liu immediately warns his Chinese readers against the temptation to consider Strauss's political philosophy the "latest fashion" in the West (*zuixin zui shimao* 最新最时髦), because it arrived in China later than deconstructivist philosophy. He does this by recalling successively the actual period of Strauss's activity (prior to Gadamer's hermeneutics, not to mention Derrida's deconstructivism), his marginal place in the academic world in the United States, and the posthumous rumors about his political and institutional influence.

The figure of Leo Strauss enabled Liu *first* to highlight the existential tension he experienced as a "cultural Christian."¹⁵ Reason and revelation are two concepts that cannot be reconciled and synthesized dialectically: on the contrary, one must experience the enriching "tension" between them. This reading *then* allows him to situate the "Chinese problem" in a deeper way than had his liberal contemporaries. In his words, "Chinese culture is in profound crisis because of the crisis of Western culture."¹⁶ In desiring to import Western thought, Chinese thinkers have reduced it to its optimistic, rationalistic, and liberal dimension; they have forgotten the trial of modernity enacted by thinkers such as Strauss. It must therefore be considered that the debate does not simply oppose Chinese and Western thought; it opposes two forms of thought which are *themselves in crisis*, traversed by internal tensions which they have not resolved.

Nevertheless, Liu's own convictions sometimes come into play to such an extent, and his concern with respect to the Chinese problem may so be great, that at certain points he abandons his role as interpreter of Strauss without

¹⁵ Christopher Nadon suggests that since the encounter of Liu Xiaofeng with the writings of Strauss, Liu "has certainly left behind 'cultural Christianity.'" See Nadon, "Leo Strauss's Critique of the Political in a Sinophone Context," in Marchal and Shaw, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss in the Chinese-Speaking World*, 152. We suggest that this remark may simplify matters a little.

¹⁶ For an instance of Liu explicitly using the Chinese word *weiji* 危机 (crisis), see *Shitelaosi de lubiao* 施特劳斯的路标, 10.

saying so, and proposes his own thesis.¹⁷ For example, Liu departs greatly from Strauss with respect to the relation to authority. The following passage from Liu's article sounds so un-Straussian that it deserves to be listened to closely; it contains two quotations from *Natural Right and History*:¹⁸

It is absolutely necessary to have an absolute authority to overcome the gravity of evil in life.¹⁹ The problem is not then whether authority must be absolute or not. Without the character of being absolute, how can it be called true authority? [For example,] for the people who live relying on the Bible, God evidently possesses supreme absolute authority. The problem is then to know if this ruling, absolute authority is "good" in itself. What is meant by "good" authority is not only that it represents natural right; in addition, it must have the power to lead life towards the "good."²⁰

Liu's possible departure from the meaning of the original text here cannot be easily grasped if one stops at a mere textual comparison between Liu's translation and Strauss's text. For we must not forget that Strauss, whatever he really says in his texts, in any case never considers a political discourse that goes hand-in-hand with his philosophical theses. In the case of Liu Xiaofeng, on the other hand, it seems to us rather that his political conceptions or those he borrows from Strauss pervade the political proposals which he delivers to the public. It would therefore be useful to keep this extract in mind and to return to it in our next section on the breadth of this reception of Strauss, when we deal with a polemic recently delivered by Liu relating to Mao.

C. INTELLECTUAL PORTRAIT OF GAN YANG: "PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL"; TENSION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS; THE COMPLEXITIES OF LIBERALISM—READER OF STRAUSS IN THE UNITED STATES

The other great figure of Chinese "Straussianism," Gan Yang, shared the same political and intellectual experience as did Liu in the 1980s. However, his mentality is very different. Whereas Liu is above all a thinker and a teacher,

¹⁷ Kai Marchal has analyzed Liu's disquieting use of the Straussian analysis of tyranny. See Marchal, "Modernity, Tyranny, and Crisis," 189.

¹⁸ In Chinese: "专制君主的统治本身并非是反自然的," "有人因统治的权力而腐败, 有的人因这样的权力而上进" ("Ciwei de wenshun" 刺猬的温顺, 53). The original texts of Strauss: "This fact alone shows that even despotic rule is not per se against nature"; "While some men are corrupted by wielding power, others are improved by it: 'power will show a man'" (Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], 133).

¹⁹ The Schmittian echo is palpable here.

²⁰ "Ciwei de wenshun" 刺猬的温顺, 53.

Gan is at first sight a “public intellectual.” Theological considerations interest him less than political culture. Finally, whereas Liu completed his training in German-language universities, Gan, after the drama of 1989, experienced a decade in American universities (notably the University of Chicago on the Committee of Social Thought, where he remained for six years and had as his PhD directors Allan Bloom, Edward Shils, and François Furet). The consequence is that their Leo Strauss is not really the same: the German Strauss of Liu, who is very metaphysical, is opposed to the American Strauss of Gan, who opens the way to an ethical and political critique.

In addition to his very active participation in public debate and his publication of numerous publications of articles, collected in edited volumes, one finds in Gan few contributions of a theoretical and academic nature. Concerning Strauss, Gan Yang has written only a preface and an afterword to the Chinese translation of *Natural Right and History* (Sanlian Shudian Press, 2003). But this preface is substantial—eighty-two pages long—and was simultaneously published separately by Oxford University Press (2002), with 174 footnotes. This sizable text therefore requires the utmost attention. At the time of its publication, Gan’s old friend Liu had already published his first article on Strauss (“The Docility of the Hedgehog”), which immediately made his name resound in the Chinese academic world. What, then, was said about Strauss by Gan Yang, who attended the University of Chicago for a long time and experienced the teaching of Straussians such as Allan Bloom? How does he place Strauss in relation to this Chinese universe? And how does his interpretation differ from that of Liu Xiaofeng?

In this long text, entitled “Leo Strauss the Political Philosopher: The Rebirth of Conservative Classical Political Philosophy” (政治哲人施特劳——古典保守主义政治哲学的复兴), Gan Yang concentrates on the works of Strauss published in the United States, leaving aside the writings of the young Strauss “for another time.”²¹ The text is divided into six parts.²²

²¹ “The first writings of Leo Strauss merit an article in itself; one can only forgo them here. It was not possible to make reference to the recent publication, *Leo Strauss, The Early Writings (1921–1932)*, edited by Michael Zank (State University of New York Press, 2002). In the last few years, Heinrich Meier in Germany and K. H. Green in the United States have contributed a great deal to the editing of Strauss’s early writings, but their interpretation of these does not convince me so much. It seems to me that if one wants to lead a discussion of Strauss’s youthful thinking, one must place Strauss in the shared perspective of a whole generation of German Jews marked by common problems—like Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem” (Gan Yang, preface to *Natural Right and History*, trans. Peng Gang [Beijing: Shenghuo Dushu Xinzhi Sanlian Shudian, 2003], 20n44).

²² These parts are as follows: 1. Introduction; 2. The question of the “concept of history” and modernity; 3. Leo Strauss in the United States; 4. Leo Strauss, liberalism, postmodernity; 5. Politics, philosophy, political philosophy; 6. Conclusion: Political philosophy as education.

What is striking at first glance is that Gan devotes many lines to presenting the situation of Strauss's thought in the United States, the debate of American Straussians with the critics of Strauss's thought, and the moral and cultural conservatism which, in Gan's presentation, is becoming the mainstream in American society; these subjects constitute almost a quarter of the article. One might be tempted to suppose that if Gan talks about it at such length it is because he lived for a long time in the United States. But this is not a very good explanation, for Gan is well aware that "Strauss's thought was not concerned with the politics and the ambience of American thought."²³ Moreover, for an author who is not so academically prolific to draft such a long text, there must be a stronger reason. In fact, after the title "Leo Strauss the Political Philosopher," a strange subtitle appears to us, with two slightly different possible translations: we can translate it as either "the rebirth of conservative classical political philosophy" or "the rebirth of classical conservatism's political philosophy." In either case, one could not be more surprised by the term *baoshou* (conservative/conservatism) inserted in the Chinese order between *gudian* (classical) and *zhengzhi zhexue* (political philosophy). In any case, the term *baoshou* should be of interest to us. It is quite common to use this term to describe Strauss's thinking; in Gan's text, however, the term occurs twenty-four times with reference to American conservatism, but only twice with reference to Strauss's political or classical philosophy per se—a few lines before the conclusion, along with the first line of the conclusion.²⁴ The proportion of twenty-four to two seems significant to us.

But what interest does Gan Yang have in discussing American politics as much as he does, and especially American conservatism? One cannot overlook this backdrop of thought: that since the 1980s American politics has been used as a model for liberals in China. (Note that the reception of Rawls in China began in the 1980s.)

Another aspect that must attract our attention is that Gan in large part mobilizes the themes of Strauss with a view to criticizing liberalism,

²³ Gan, preface to *Natural Right and History*, 20.

²⁴ The two passages in which the term "conservative" is associated with Strauss are these: "Certainly, this Socrates who defends justice and piety is what Plato and Xenophon teach exoterically, but Strauss insists that exoteric teaching is precisely political philosophy. For if there is no exoteric teaching, there will only be foolish philosophy. In this case, Strauss would no longer revive conservative classical political philosophy, but he would be entirely merged with the radically critical contemporary philosophers of the mind" (*ibid.*, 79). "Strauss does not particularly believe that *classical political philosophy* is conservative. *On Classical Political Philosophy*, which he published in 1945, probably expresses in the most concise and clear way what he himself means by the term 'political philosophy'" (*ibid.*).

proclaiming this term directly in the title of part 4 of the work, whereas, we will recall, for Liu, Strauss is enlisted in the fight against nihilism.²⁵ In part 4, which begins with a recapitulation of American conservative politics from the 1960s to the 1980s, Gan pays the greatest attention to the Rawlsian theory of justice and to the question whether the idea of the “just” must precede any substantial idea of the “good.” Meanwhile, in “The Docility of the Hedgehog,” Liu puts more effort into explaining the disagreement between Strauss and Isaiah Berlin.

Without neglecting the intersection between the battles fought by all the parties,²⁶ one is forced to note that, by making several journeys between the thought of Strauss and American political debates, Gan Yang gives pride of place to the Straussian proposal to “return to the political world that is pre-philosophical, pre-scientific, and pre-theoretical.”²⁷ One sees this when Gan explains, in part 5, what Strauss’s political philosophy is:

Although Strauss greatly insisted in his “political philosophy” on the conflict between philosophy and politics, this did not encourage him to flee “politics” for “philosophy.” On the contrary, the first question in Strauss’s political philosophy is to “return to the original political world before philosophy, science, and theories.” If modern, i.e., liberal or left-wing, politics presuppose liberal or left-wing philosophy, then what is most particular in Strauss’s “political philosophy” is that it presupposes “politics” in the Straussian sense! In other words, in order to “depoliticize philosophy,” it is necessary to “remove the philosophical dimension from politics.”²⁸ Thus, Strauss’s “political philosophy” consists of two parts or stages, i.e., politics must first be brought back to its state “before philosophy, science, and theories,” in order to bring philosophy back into its domain from “purely philosophical, scientific, and theoretical.”²⁹

²⁵ See Liu, preface to *Shitelaosi de lubiao*: “For me, this is adieu...to the turn of spirit [or mind] since 1789.”

²⁶ “Liberalism says it wants to regard with an equal dignity all religions, all nations, all genders, and all cultural traditions. But the result is that it makes all religions, nations, genders, and cultural traditions lose their meaning. Since liberalism recognizes their meaning only in the private sphere and not in the public sphere, they all become of little importance and count for nothing. This is nothing more than nihilism and relativism in the eyes of Strauss” (Gan, preface to *Natural Right and History*, 51).

²⁷ See Leo Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 27–29; Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 81.

²⁸ Let us note here that Gan Yang, by distinguishing philosophy and politics in this way, rejects what Maoism claims to be the realization of the absolute in political life.

²⁹ Gan, preface to *Natural Right and History*, 69–70.

It is interesting to note that if Gan strongly emphasizes the conflict between philosophy and politics, he almost silently bypasses the conflict between philosophy and theology; in contrast, Liu, we recall, seems always ready to return to this troubling and fertile tension. For Gan Yang, what Strauss teaches us is to return to the political world as such. To explain the crucial point of Strauss's merit and what distinguishes him from other thinkers, Gan writes:

It really would be too shallow if Strauss by his "political philosophy" meant to say only that philosophy must be superior to politics or that the first must surpass the second, or if he wanted only to emphasize his contempt for politics in the name of philosophy—because it is the most popular modern "opinion" since recent times, and shared by all those who have a minimum amount of "knowledge." It would also be no less trivial if Strauss wanted to show the illusory nature of the Enlightenment philosophers' intention to liberate the people—for postmodern philosophers are no less insightful on this point than Strauss. What makes Strauss really distinguished is that he highlights "Socrates who defends justice and piety." Strauss's fundamental conception of the relationship between "philosophy and politics" is that "an immature philosophy" often likes to show how much it loves "philosophy," and how much it despises "politics" or "human affairs."...But "philosophy at a mature age," that is, political philosophy, on the contrary "turns around and pays mature attention to politics and to moral affairs; it is interested in human affairs and in man."³⁰

The importance of these few lines must be stressed. We learn from an earlier work of Gan's that the intellectual environment at the Institute of Studies of Western Philosophy in the 1980s was such that "one was interested essentially in theories, and relatively despised practice."³¹ Though surrounded by this environment, Gan was at the same time set apart from it by his own temperament; he was always someone who was very interested in politics. After the drama of 1989, the question whether one could again be interested in political affairs became a difficult one for impassioned young intellectuals like Gan, especially as it appeared more and more problematic for liberalism to install itself easily in China. This is undoubtedly what the phrase "pays mature attention to politics and to moral affairs" suggests.

It seems that Gan interprets Strauss from a clearly political perspective. While Liu Xiaofeng is greatly concerned with dramatic events of a historical and theological nature, Gan attaches great importance to the American

³⁰ Ibid., 78.

³¹ Gan Yang, *Jiangcuo jiucuo* 将错就错 [Know how to learn from your mistakes] (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

democratic experience and implicitly rejects the movements inspired by liberalism in contemporary China. We may now attempt to recapitulate how Gan positions himself with respect to Strauss, both in his distance from Liu's positions and with respect to the political situation in China.

Gan's preface to *Natural Right and History* is at bottom an exposition of his general view of Strauss. Gan chooses to discuss Strauss's books by focusing with a particular interest on the conflict between philosophy and politics, whereas Liu Xiaofeng is more interested in the tension between philosophy and theology. The fact that Gan Yang goes back and forth between American political experiences and Strauss's theses does not point to a confusion in his understanding of Strauss's works and the possible relationship between American conservatives and Strauss's thought; it points rather to the attention Gan has always paid to the question of the political choices offered to Chinese intellectuals. Gan's liberal engagement in the 1980s was an experience that led him to observe closely the debate between liberalism and conservatism in the United States, and after his return to China, this observation of the United States, along with familiarity with Strauss's texts, modified his relationship with political thought and political practice.

Under these conditions, what political position could Gan adopt, having been enriched by his years in the United States, during which he made so many observations and did so much reading? And what would his engagements in academic politics be? If his publications on Strauss, strictly speaking, seem a little meager, his intellectual undertakings and his political positions, which were strongly linked to his reflections on Strauss, were to be of considerable influence. If Gan chooses to finish his article by granting the place of honor to education, this was not mere lip service.

The advantage of this Chinese reception of Strauss was that it did not remain a theoretical enterprise but was translated into *practical* projects: in the framework of a rediscovery of the role of the humanities, the two authors collaborated at the same time on a work of reforming university institutions and on editorial work consisting of translations and commentaries on classical Greek and Latin texts (in the collection *Hermes: Classics & Interpretation*, for example).

Gan Yang was involved in university reforms from 2003 onwards, when the University of Peking was considering large-scale reforms. There were on

one hand scholars such as Zhang Weiyong,³² who supported the idea that teaching should be done in English. Gan Yang published an article in which he opposed this conception of reform and maintained that the most precious nucleus of American university education was the general teachings on the humanities (*Tongshi jiaoyu* 通识教育), or liberal education in the classical sense. In 2009, Gan opened a training center under the name of Liberal Arts College (*Boya Xueyuan*) at Sun Yat-Sen University of Guangzhou, and was himself the director. This training center began by selecting thirty students who had just graduated from Sun Yat-Sen University to follow an original and controversial path in contemporary China: from its inauguration to today, according to their 2013 recruitment announcement, the center explicitly called itself *elitist*,³³ requiring the student to understand classical Chinese and ancient Greek and Latin. Without going so far as to state that these Chinese university reforms find their entire philosophical source in the teachings of Strauss, one is tempted to suggest that they gain in intellectual depth by their implicit reference to those teachings, both in their liberal and their elitist dimensions (while being connected with the American model whose core is being debated). For in the background of Gan's reflection, there are certainly texts of Strauss such as "What Is Liberal Education?"³⁴ This education is "liberal" not in the sense of being opposed to a conservative education, but in the sense that it is a *literate education* of a certain species, a form of education in letters or through letters, which does not tend to form "specialists without spirit or sensualists without heart," in the words of Max Weber. It is also "elitist" to the extent that, as Strauss says, it is, in a democratic society, "the counter-poison to mass culture." Although open to all, according to Gan Yang's vision, it can by definition educate only a minority: according to Strauss, "liberal education is the effort needed to found an aristocracy within the democratic mass society."³⁵

³² Zhang Weiyong 张维迎, an economist renowned in China for his interventions in the debate on economic reforms, teaches at the University of Peking and, between 2003 and 2012, held the post of assistant to the president.

³³ We can see this program is in line with the elitist tradition of the Committee on Social Thought of the University of Chicago.

³⁴ Gan Yang makes explicit reference to this text in the conclusion of "Leo Strauss the Political Philosopher": "We can now say this: in large part, the *political philosophy* of Strauss takes concrete form in education. That is, in implementing a *liberal education* in the universities in order to exercise an influence on future citizens and legislators" (preface to *Natural Right and History*, 81).

³⁵ See Leo Strauss, "What Is Liberal Education?," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 3–8. I am especially grateful to M. Joël Thoraval for having made explicit this link between the thought of Strauss and the reform practices of Gan Yang.

2. AMBIGUITIES IN TRANSLATION

Before addressing ambiguities in translation, we must first emphasize once more the condensed timing of this reception, which created an asymmetry between the time of conception and the time of reception. Strauss's work was conceived over a period of fifty years (if one counts the time between his early writings of the 1920s and his last writings on the philosophy of Plato in the early 1970s), whereas the Chinese translations were published for the most part over one decade. While saluting the courage and energy shown in this intellectual effort, we must acknowledge that the difficulty of the task was considerable.

Since it is hardly possible to explore all of the translated works and anthologies of Strauss, nor in this context to address all the terms which may be problematic to translate, we will concentrate on a few examples of translation, especially two, the expressions "natural right" and "tension." For these two notions figure prominently in the Straussian corpus, and they embody to a large extent the interest and the difficulty of the process of reception in general.

For the translation of "natural right," the problem resides mostly in the treatment of the term "right." Before the reception of Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, this term was systematically translated as *quanli* 权利 ("rights" in the modern sense), which bears the seal of modern political philosophy. However, the classical doctrine of natural right is precisely what Strauss wanted us to rediscover. How, then, should this double meaning be translated with precision and coherence, bearing in mind that the only corresponding term in modern Chinese is the modern idea of natural right? The solution adopted by the translator of *Natural Right and History*, Peng Gang, is always to translate "natural right" as *ziran quanli* 自然权利, both in the title and even in the passages where Strauss specifically dealt with doctrines of classical natural rights. (In these cases, Peng Gang inserted the term *gudian* 古典 [classical] before *ziran quanli* 自然权利 [natural right].)

This treatment is contested by Peng's Chinese colleagues,³⁶ along with other, more minor points concerning inexactitudes or omissions.

³⁶ See Zhang Xu 张旭, "Shitelaosi zai zhongguo: Shitelaosi yanjiu he lunzheng zongshu" 施特劳斯在中国: 施特劳斯研究和论争综述 [Strauss in China: Summary overview on the research and polemics around Strauss], in *Gujin zhizheng yu wenming zijue* 古今之争与文明自觉——中国语境中的施特劳斯 [The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns and the consciousness of civilization: Strauss in the Chinese context], ed. Xu Jian (Shanghai: Huadongshifan daxuechubanshe, 2010), 122.

If this indifferent translation of “natural right” appears at first sight to be imprudent, it seems to us that it is not unconscious. If an apparent imprudence is a considered one, it is no longer an imprudence, strictly speaking.

Gan Yang, who wrote a rather long introduction to the translation of this work, and who by so doing implicitly took responsibility for the quality of the translation, wrote:

For this celebrated work of Strauss, the term “natural right,” which we find in the title, in itself poses a great difficulty for translation into Chinese. For Strauss intentionally uses the same term, “natural right,” in his work to designate two entirely opposing conceptions: one is the conception which he calls classical “natural right,” the other is the concept (which is modern according to him) of “natural right.” Thus, the cases evoking “natural right” in the classical meaning must be understood as *ziran zhengque* or *ziran zhengdang* (natural justice) or more precisely as *gudian de ziran zhengyi shu* (the classical doctrine of natural justice). As for the cases concerning modern theories on this subject, it is surely theories of *ziran quanli* (natural right) or *Tianfu quanli* (innate right of each person) to which one is so accustomed.³⁷

He continues in a footnote:

Before [our reception of Strauss], in the world of the Chinese language, we were entirely used to translating “natural right” as *tianfu quanli*. Among these countless cases, it is sufficient to mention as an example the one in Spinoza’s *Theological Political Treatise*. Comparing the English and translated Chinese versions of the former, all of the instances of “the natural right of the individual” become *geren de tianfu quanli* (everyone’s innate right).³⁸

Here we see a clear consciousness on the part of Gan Yang of the double meaning of this expression (“natural right”) and the difficulty that this presents for its translation. Therefore, it may be wrong to blame the translator with regard to this point, especially since *ziran zhengque* or *ziran zhengdang*, which better express the classical meaning of the doctrine in question, sound too unusual in Chinese. This choice of translation seems rather plausible to us, even if we regret that it cannot have had as much effect as if one had chosen to impose a neologism in the translation of the title.

³⁷ Gan, preface to *Natural Right and History*, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 11n25.

Another term seldom seen in the Chinese language is “tension.”³⁹ The general convention was, if necessary, to translate this term by *zhangli* 张力, which is inspired by the model of physics, evoking a conflict of forces within a system (of something taut). However, this term was little used before the reception of Strauss.

However, one could have only a poor understanding of Strauss’s analysis of the relationship between reason and revelation, between philosophy and politics, without taking seriously the term “tension.” Thus, Strauss’s reception coincides with a more widespread use in Chinese academic discourse of the term *zhangli* (literally “force of tension”). And indeed a second option comes into play, translating it using the term *jinzhang*, which had a mostly psychological meaning: “stress.”⁴⁰ It seems that the expression *jinzhang* had only limited use in philosophical discourse before the reception of Strauss. As an indication, if we launch a Google Scholar search of the term *jinzhang* (specifying that it is not in the psychological sense) on articles published between 2002 and 2012, we notice that the term is massively used in the human and social sciences, whereas if we search in articles between 1989 and 1999 (leaving aside the three years, between 1999 and 2002, when Strauss’s reception begins to take place), the term *jinzhang* hardly appears in the sense of a “tension” between two or several poles. It is interesting to compare the two different treatments these two terms have received.

In the case of the notion of “natural right” and that of “tension,” it must be stated that each presents great difficulties of translation. One is obliged to create or modify Chinese words to load them with a new meaning. What is different, and if we may say so, what separates the destiny of the two notions, is that the modest treatment reserved for the expression “natural right” has rendered this term much less widespread than the term “tension.” The latter was initially used to understand the Straussian analysis of the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem, between philosophy and the city. Today its Chinese equivalents, *jinzhang* and *zhangli*, have taken a spectacular flight. In

³⁹ As suggested by Anne Cheng in *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*: “The absence of theorization in the Greek or Scholastic way probably explains the Chinese tendency toward syncretisms. There is no eternal and absolute truth, but mixtures. The result is that contradictions are not perceived as irreducible, but rather as alternatives. Instead of terms that exclude one another, one sees predominantly complementary oppositions that admit more or less: one passes from Yin to Yang, from undifferentiation to differentiation, by insensible transition” (Cheng, *Histoire de la pensée chinoise* [Paris: Seuil, 2002], 34; my translation).

⁴⁰ One observes the greatest number of recourses to the term *zhangli*, or to this particular use of *jinzhang*, in the Chinese translations of Strauss’s commentaries on these two themes.

almost all the disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities, its widespread use—not without confusion or nonsense from time to time, it must be said—seems to suggest that it may well play in the humanities the role of a watchword, a role previously taken by such terms as “contradiction” and “dialectic” (*maodun* 矛盾, *bianzheng* 辩证). In fact, the vogue for the word “tension” makes sense in a post-Maoist culture. Unlike dialectics, which, in its Maoist version, practically aimed to remove one of the two terms of the “contradiction” (as in the “contradiction between the enemy and us”), the idea of tension consists in maintaining the two terms of the relationship. Tension is no longer there to be “overcome” but is to persist, playing a positive role (as in the case of a mutual limitation or an internal critique between two notions, neither of which must disappear). This meaning is found in the title of a book by Thomas Kuhn: *The Essential Tension* (University of Chicago Press, 1977)—in Chinese, *biyao de zhangli*.

3. INSIGHT ON THREE LINES OF DEBATE: THE CLASSICS, POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION, POLITICS

Without being able to go beyond a preliminary approach, we will, finally, attempt to present three major themes raised by Chinese “Straussianism.”

The first is the question of the *classical*. The classical is at the center of the education that the two authors desire to give, in their critiques of an educational system derived either from liberal modernism or from official Marxism. The question that arises is nevertheless that of knowing the extent to which the European notion of “classical” can be applied to the Chinese context. Reflection is necessary because of the interruption of the tradition of letters that once articulated canonical texts and commentaries.

The second theme is that of the *religious*. This perspective makes it possible to question what is seen as the superficiality of the thought of the Enlightenment, as it had redeveloped in China in the 1980s. Note that this perspective has a more existential dimension in the “Cultural Christian” that Liu claimed to be, remaining more discreet and more academic in Gan. They have an interest in a more religious dimension of Confucianism, that of the ancient School of Gongyang (which offers the Confucian classics in a more mystical and even millenarianist interpretation). If Strauss is easily put to use, it is sometimes in a manner that is perhaps instrumentalized. On the other hand, one must emphasize an important deficiency: one finds no reflections on authors of importance in Jewish thought.

The third theme is the *political*. What the two authors agree on is largely negative. It is the rejection of the liberal and democratic optimism of the 1980s, of which they themselves had partaken. But a careful reading of their texts shows that their perspectives diverge. Liu's attraction to the absolute ends up in distancing himself from any form of political liberalism. A recent polemic on the role of Mao, presented as a "founding father of the fatherland" (*guofu* 国父), expresses a certain development, which Liu does not make explicit. If it is at first sight astonishing that someone like Liu could recognize such a place for Mao Zedong, it is possible that Maoism has marked Liu Xiaofeng intellectually, and not just in terms of his personal experience. In fact, if we dig deep, the Straussian themes that have caught the attention of Liu are similar to some themes of Maoism: demanding an absolute truth (the Maoist conviction that contradictions must be absolute principles in the human and natural world); the relationship between philosophy (Maoist, Marxist-Leninist philosophy) and politics; and the theological question (Maoism as religion).

With Gan, on the contrary, there is greater fidelity to the liberal project. His American experience allows him to criticize Chinese intellectuals in the name of the inner complexity of liberalism. American liberalism includes two aspects: on the right, a cultural conservatism (of which Strauss is a representative); and on the left, a reform project accentuating the role of the state (following the model of the New Deal). This double character allows Gan to denounce the "vulgar liberalism" of his opponents on the right and on the left. He is open both to cultural conservatism (thanks to the necessarily elitist role of the humanities) and to an almost social-democratic American perspective that brings him closer to the Chinese New Left.

In short, the two authors join in emphasizing an *internal tension*: for Liu, a philosophical internal tension (between reason and revelation); for Gan, a political internal tension (between liberalism's conservative wing and its reform wing—the latter picking up, in a more modern form, part of the socialist heritage).



In any case, we must acknowledge the considerable effort of Liu Xiaofeng and Gan Yang in introducing the thought of Leo Strauss in China in a way that, beyond all polemics and excesses, opens up new fields of thought and action.

Their enterprise perhaps can be understood only by being put back into their respective intellectual journeys, and in the larger perspective that is the contemporary history of China. If we had to outline these two figures in a

few words, at the risk of schematization, we would say this: in Liu's case, the lived experiences of the "Cultural Revolution" and the drama of 1989, articulated with an early and profound interest in theology, philosophy, and politics, prepare the ground for his encounter with Strauss, with his qualities and limitations. For Gan, against the backdrop of continuous political commitments through historical vicissitudes, Strauss's interpretation of his thinking is not dissociated from a perspective on American politics, and, in essence, remains guided by a questioning of China's modern politics.

If our own journey is still too short to capture this phenomenon of reception in all its dimensions, we can nonetheless suggest an outline of its principal characteristics.

First of all, it is important to note the extensive character of this reception: it was not limited to a certain circle of readers (specialists of a particular author, for example), nor to a single discipline (such as philosophy or social science). The Straussian themes seem to penetrate various fields of study, also in relation to Chinese "national studies" (*guoxue* 国学).

Second, the extensive character of this reception must be noted. As much as the polemics on certain other authors may still be limited in the academic universe, it seems to us that here the critical texts go beyond the academic field. As the academic contributions and public debate of our two Chinese Straussians are inseparable, criticism of their positions has often been expressed in a confusing way, unless we recognize that the controversies are less about Strauss's own thinking than about the influences of Strauss's thinking in China.

Third, we must emphasize the practical character of this reception; whether or not it was faithful to its inspirer, the Straussian spirit in China was to be expressed in acts: in educational reforms; in great collections of translations of the Western classics; and in the support of intellectual enterprise aiming at reviving the value of the Chinese classics.

Finally, we must emphasize the extremely compressed time frame of this reception. If this circumstance contributes to the strangeness of the encounter, it highlights the quality of the results already obtained in such a short time. These debates and discussions will continue, but it is still difficult to say whether the "passion for Strauss" will have been at the origin of a real Straussian school in China or whether it will have been the occasion for a particularly revealing episode in the self-analysis of modern Chinese intellectuals.

