PREFACE

THIS BOOK REPRESENTS a revision and expansion of the four Martin Lectures I delivered at Oberlin College in 2018. Long before that, however, I had had the idea of trying to see the texts of my field—the Greek and Latin texts of classical antiquity—from a perspective outside, not inside, the main cultures of Western Europe and the United States. The impetus for the study was to learn in what ways the Chinese and their culture are *different* readers of these foundational texts that lie behind western concepts of individuals, citizens, politics, rationality, and even morality. Because these norms were shaped in part by the ideals of classical antiquity (especially via its impact on the Renaissance and the Enlightenment), they had always made "made sense" to me as categories for thought, even when I disagreed with their contents. I wanted to break out of this hall of mirrors, to see how the categories and assumptions of this tradition were *not* universal. What would an entirely different civilization with its own traditions—namely, China—make of the Greek classics?

Immediately, I ran into my first problem: what the Chinese wrote about western antiquity, they largely wrote (at least in those days, about a decade ago) in Chinese. The prolegomenon to the project was therefore learning Mandarin, a language I found incredibly difficult despite my experience with Indo-European languages. On top of that challenge, at the time I

started the project, the Mandarin words for figures like Socrates had not yet fully crystallized into one particular set of characters (*hanzi*), making research still more difficult. Moreover, my period of investigation (roughly 1890 to 2020) contained a dazzling array of major Chinese thinkers about the classical tradition whose opinions not only changed with their particular times, but sometimes even within a lifetime. I had taken on a Herculean task that in no way would I be able to fully complete.[1]

All the same, several amazing findings awaited me. The first was just how important the Greek classics have been in China, where they are often read as directly relevant to the Chinese politics, government, culture, and ethics of the present day. The second was that many Chinese thinkers have relied on these ancient texts to support broad generalizations about an imaginary "West." The last revelation was that from 1989 onwards (after the "incident" at Tiananmen Square), a conceptual revolution took place among a group of Chinese intellectuals, public thinkers, and even government officials as to how they read these classical texts. In other words, there was a before and an after to the study I had undertaken, not just a series of minor alterations. This about-face in reception (it did not include the dissidents in exile and mainland scholars not interested in political statements) was remarkably decisive in that its core mission—the application of these texts to support Chinese socialist and Confucian ideals—has been going on in much the same vein over the past thirty years. Let me be clear: I am not *criticizing* what some westerners might see as an "appropriation" of Greek political and philosophical thought, but rather, contemplating, sometimes with surprise, the various Chinese readings of antiquity I have come across in doing research for this book. A critique is not the right response: we must understand

that new (even global, if you will) interpretations of old texts are embedded in cultures and locales that see ideas and texts differently from the original audience (which itself was never monolithic). This means that my investigation into the transformation of parts of classical antiquity, "does not ask primarily whether a given reference to a *reference culture* is correct or incorrect" (as the new field of "transformation theory" carefully articulates).[2] The point is, what *is* the reading?[3] And what can we learn from it about its readers, and about ourselves too?

A few comments about my procedures in the face of the mountains of information may be helpful. First, this study of Chinese responses to classical Greek thought, while it dips into the granular, is broad in scope. I do not cite readings produced by "institutional Greco-Roman classicists" at Chinese universities because their engagement is mostly with other classical scholars outside China and with the extant body of critical literature on classical antiquity.[4] The Chinese scholars I do investigate promote public and ideological responses to classical texts and are widely influential and well represented in the public arena. Second, I have tried to make sure my claims are representative of a broad readership by paying attention to citation indices on Chinese databases, by reading many different kinds of publications, and by looking to blog sites and social media as well. Finally, while I am sensitive to the difficulty of comparisons between vastly different cultures, I do not attempt to add to the discussion about the inadequacy of the binary categories "West" and "East" to stand for the complicated nexus of countries and cultures that is the world today.[5] Still, since I will be using these nouns around the specific topic of China and western antiquity, I hope that the reader will tolerate recourse to this terminology as the simplest way to refer to my topic.[6] As a small nod to the problem, I do not capitalize west and east.

In seeking to write a book that led me far outside my usual subject matter (it remains to be seen if I've done so à la Icarus), I have leaned on many scholars. Mentioning their names here is small recompense for their help. First, profound thanks to my amiable colleague Haun Saussy, who has answered many, many queries and always with a smile. I am grateful to the great Sir G.E.R. Lloyd for his scholarship and support. He has written many a recommendation on my behalf! Wentao Zhai at Harvard University reviewed the whole manuscript when it was done and saved me from many embarrassing mistakes. He also offered me a perspective well-informed in both Chinese and American culture. My gratitude to many other interlocutors, including Nicholas Koss, Yiqun Zhou, Zhang Longxi, Huang Yang, Jinyu Liu, Weihua Leng, Jue Hou, Hansong Li, Kaicheng Fang, Neville Morley, Daniel A. Bell, Leopold Leeb, Wu Jiaxun, and John Kirby. I received indispensable assistance from my graduate student researcher, Jiayi Zhu, and much help from a pair of plucky and hard-working undergraduates: Connie Chen and Henry Zhao. I even had the good luck to encounter three high-school students who volunteered to work as research interns: Erik Wang, Tony Zhou, and Mido Sang. May they thrive!

I am glad to have had the help of Princeton University Press's internal reviewers, one of whom, James Hankins at Harvard University, offered great insight. I interviewed Gan Yang (one of the figures in this book) many years ago at the start of this project and I am grateful for his kindness at that time. The Martin Lectures at Oberlin College provided the chance to think through the book's final shape, and I thank the Classics Department there for their hospitality, as well as my audience members on those occasions—many of them Chinese—for their thoughtful and challenging questions. I also thank the History and Theory workshop at Oslo, the commentators on Academia

.edu, and academic audiences at the University of Chicago, Harvard University, and the University of Chicago Center in Beijing. Finally, many thanks to my efficient and hard-working copyeditor, Michelle Hawkins. This was no easy manuscript to deal with.

Let me also voice a few notes of humility. This little book, I hope, merely opens the door to different studies of the interpretation of western antiquity in China. It has had to be narrow in scope: I do not consider ancient *literary* works, such as Greek drama and other forms of poetry. Nor would I claim there's a single point of view, or one standard interpretive technique, with which Chinese readers, then or now, approach the western classics—though I do claim there are trends. In the end, there are different sorts of interpreters of these texts, but the scholars who are most relevant to this project publish in newspapers, speak on television, debate each other publicly, and create an audience and a following. As I've noted, a few of them have flip-flopped from their views in the 1980s to new pro-government perspectives, transmitting these opinions via their changed interpretations of the classics. For all these reasons, both the academics and their writings are a fascinating object of study.[7] As Fredrik Fällman puts it, the topics that are "discussed in Chinese *academia* reflect the state and the trends of the country as much as reports on economy and politics."[8]

In closing, although I spent much of my childhood in Asia, I have also attended European schools and American universities, and I know that I am largely a creature of the latter intellectual and cultural traditions. Despite my ten years studying Mandarin (including at two universities in Beijing and Taiwan), my many visits to different parts of China, and my immersion in the Chinese twentieth century, I will never be culturally Chinese or understand the myriad ways in which their complex

present is informed by their equally complex past.[9] This book is an effort by a British-American classicist who grew up outside the United States to see through the eyes of yet another culture. Let me apologize in advance: I will make mistakes; I will overemphasize some things and underemphasize others; I will offer incorrect assumptions; I will end up generalizing when I should not do so; and, undoubtedly, I will cite a webpage that has since ceased to exit. Pitfalls await and I have already irked some of the scholars I write about.[10]

Earlier versions of Chapters 3 and 4 have appeared in previous articles. I thank the University of Chicago Press and Wiley-Blackwell for permission to use revised versions of that material. Very often, I found access to Chinese articles to be easier online, where they were often reproduced, but without page numbers. Finally, unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Mandarin are ineluctably mine.

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