Introduction

Bringing Ethics Back into Chinese Discourse

Cheng Li

Civilization is a stream with banks. The stream is sometimes filled with blood from people killing, stealing, shouting and doing the things historians usually record, while on the banks, unnoticed, people build homes, make love, raise children, sing songs, write poetry and even whittle statues. The story of civilization is the story of what happened on the banks. Historians are pessimists because they ignore the banks for the river.

—Will Durant, The Story of Civilization

I first met Professor He Huaihong at a small café near the Law School of Peking University on an autumn afternoon in 2011. Actually, I came not to meet with him, but with his wife, Shao Binhong, executive editor of the journal International Economic Review and researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Shao is a former CCTV anchorwoman, best known for her primetime feature program, “Oriental Portraits.”! We wanted to discuss Sino-American economic relations on the tenth anniversary of China’s

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1. Shao Binhong produced about 300 episodes of the CCTV feature program “Oriental Portraits” (东方之子) in the 1990s and became a household name in the country.
accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Shao brought her husband He Huaihong to the meeting.

While fully engaged in the conversation, Professor He only occasionally made comments. He struck me as a soft-spoken, humble, gracious, and very knowledgeable gentleman. At the end of the meeting, he gave me his two recently published volumes, *The Hereditary Society* and *The Selection Society*. These two books served as the expanded version of his famous “dual study” of Chinese elite selection in ancient history and the ethical foundation of the governing structure of pre-1905 China.

I came to more fully appreciate He Huaihong’s scholarship and his intellectual contributions, especially in the field of ethics, almost a year later. In the autumn of 2012, I began to solicit recommendations from scholars in China for a volume on ethics for the Thornton Center Chinese Thinkers series published by the Brookings Institution Press. To my surprise, the three distinguished Chinese public intellectuals I contacted—political scientist Yu Keping, legal scholar He Weifang, and philosopher Xu Youyu—all singled out He Huaihong as the most influential ethicist in China today. I spent the following months reading He’s writings and was deeply enthralled by his philosophical and historical narratives on ethical perplexity in present-day China. Fascinated by the depth and breadth of his intellectual inquiry, I often meet with Professor He whenever I visit Beijing. He and I have had several substantial discussions and numerous e-mail exchanges during the past three years.

It was hardly a coincidence that the three aforementioned prominent Chinese scholars, though strikingly different in terms of academic field, political status, and worldview, all regard He Huaihong as the country’s leading ethicist. Combining masterful expertise on Chinese philosophical tradition with a deep knowledge of Western ethical theories, He Huaihong has produced a steady stream of widely respected scholarly publications on ethics and morality for almost three decades. He Huaihong is not an academic who isolates himself in an ivory tower and produces research that can only be understood

2. Yu Keping and He Weifang are the authors of the two earlier volumes of this series: Yu Keping, *Democracy Is a Good Thing: Essays on Politics, Society, and Culture in Contemporary China* (Brookings, 2009), and He Weifang, *In the Name of Justice: Striving for the Rule of Law in China* (Brookings, 2012). Both were named by the U.S.-based *Foreign Policy* magazine as among the World’s 100 most influential thinkers in 2011. *Foreign Policy* website, November, 28, 2011 (http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/11/28/the-fp-top-100-global-thinkers-4/). Xu Youyu offered me the recommendation through his wife, Professor Yang Gonghua, China’s leading epidemiologist.
by a handful of peers. On the contrary, He is known for his role as a public intellectual who is keenly interested in linking past with present, bridging East and West, and blurring academic boundaries.

As early as 1989, for example, He Huaihong translated Meditations, reflections of Marcus Aurelius, emperor of ancient Rome (161–180 CE) and one of the most important Stoic philosophers. Meditations is a monumental work in ethics that focuses on following nature as a source of guidance, peace, and inspiration at a time of tremendous physical tension and moral pressure. In November 2007, during his visit to Singapore, then Premier Wen Jiabao told journalists that Meditations was his “bedside book,” and that he had read it more than 100 times. The first Chinese version of this Marcus Aurelius masterpiece, translated by He Huaihong and published by the China Social Science Press in 1989, has sold more than 500,000 copies.

Over the past three decades, through scholarly publications of both original works and translations, frequent lectures at academic conferences and in public forums, commentaries, and featured interviews in print, on television, and on social media, He Huaihong has emerged as one of the most influential thinkers in the country. These endeavors have transformed the Chinese public’s understanding of the moral predicament underlying many news headlines and controversial issues in this rapidly changing country. Perhaps more effectively and constructively than anyone else, He Huaihong is bringing ethics back into Chinese discourse.

During the past half-century, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has experienced several incredible human-made dramas: Red Guard fanaticism, a loss of education for a whole generation during the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen tragedy, an economic miracle and the subsequent rise of money worship, rampant official corruption and the resulting legitimacy crisis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the ongoing and painstaking search


4. This number was provided by He Huaihong. See also Wang Jingjing, “He Huaihong: Rang wenhe chengwei zhuliu taidu” [Let the moderate attitude be the mainstream one], Huangqiu renwu [Global characters], No. 24, 2013.
for modern virtues in an ancient civilization. He Huaihong was not only an intimate witness to all of these extraordinary experiences; he also played a key role as a philosopher, historian, and social critic exploring the deeper intellectual and sociological origins of these events and their profound impacts on society’s moral codes.

What, then, is the current status of ethics and morality in China? What are the causes of the widely perceived moral decay (daode huapo) and crisis of trust (xinren weiji) in Chinese society? Why is ethical discourse critically important to an assessment of China’s reemergence in the twenty-first century? Does an analysis of ethical issues suffice to reveal the sociopolitical challenges and the ideological vacuum that China now confronts as a nation? What is the relationship between individual moral standards and social ethical norms, or between moral principles and the political system in a given country? How can China reconstruct a forward-looking and globally oriented moral order from the broken shards of the traditional ethical code? How should the Chinese rebuild their ethical norms? What kind of contemporary values and beliefs should the Chinese embrace? How should they tread the fine line between preserving Chinese ethical norms and promoting universal values at a time of unprecedented multidimensional, fast-paced globalization?

This volume, which includes some of He Huaihong’s most important and representative works, will shed valuable light on all of these important questions. In a broader sense, the volume not only highlights the imperative for ethical discourse in a country that is increasingly seen by many as both a materialistic giant and a spiritual dwarf, but also demonstrates an innovative effort to rebuild the Chinese collective consciousness and social norms necessary for an ethical awakening. The ramifications of the reestablishment of systems of beliefs and ethics will be felt beyond China’s national borders, especially now that the country is reemerging as a global power.

Chinese Concerns and Debates about Moral Decay

It seems a paradox—an irony—that the growing Chinese concerns about moral decay are occurring in a period when China is perceived by many people both at home and abroad to be rising, or reemerging, on the world stage. Top Chinese leaders—from Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping—have often linked China’s remarkable economic development in the reform era with what they have called “cultural advancement” (wenhua zhenxing) and “spiritual civilization” (jingshen wenming). At the turn of the century, Jiang
Zemin claimed that the CCP in the new environment of the twenty-first century should represent the “progressive course of China’s advanced culture,” “advanced productive forces,” and “fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people.” This so-called Theory of Three-Represents constituted a guiding ideological framework for this course.

In the Hu Jintao era, the CCP even claimed that China had reentered its “booming and golden age” (shengshi), similar to that of the Tang and Song dynasties. For many years, the political establishment and official media used that phrase to characterize the achievements under Hu’s leadership, especially in referring to landmark events like the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo. This complacent notion was met with much criticism in the country, not only from liberal public intellectuals but also from some senior officials.

Ever since he became the top CCP leader in 2012, Xi Jinping has advocated the “Chinese dream” and “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” In a widely reported speech delivered in the fall of 2014 at an international conference in Beijing on the 2,665th anniversary of the birth of Confucius, Xi claimed that the CCP does not adhere to cultural nihilism but instead greatly values Confucianism and other important aspects of Chinese tradition. For Xi, China’s rise to prominence on the world stage should not lie solely in its economic accomplishments but also in public confidence in its cultural values and social ethics.


7. For example, Zi Zhongyun stated bluntly that underneath this superficial “booming and golden age,” there is a profound sense of crisis in the making and deep concern about the moral decay of the regime. Hao Yu, “Zi Zhongyun: Zhongjian Zhishifenzi dui ‘daotong’ de dandang” [Resuming the role of intellectuals in ethics], Jingji guancha bao (Economic Observers), December 25, 2010. See also http://chinaelections.com/article/101/180995.html.


10. For more discussion of Xi Jinping’s effort to promote Confucian values, see Evan Osnos, “Confucius Comes Home,” New Yorker, January 13, 2014.
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The emphasis of top Chinese leaders on cultural and ethical advancement does not necessarily imply they would completely deny the moral predicament in reform-era China. Deng Xiaoping, for example, acknowledged on a number of occasions in the late 1980s that the greatest mistake during the first decade of post-Mao reforms was in the domain of education, referring not only to young students in schools, but also to the general public and the inadequacy of its ideological and ethical development.11 Probably the Chinese leadership’s most candid acknowledgment of their failures in reestablishing a belief system and reconstructing social ethics came from Wen Jiabao. In 2011 then premier Wen made an astonishingly forceful statement about the poor status of ethics in the wake of several horrifying food and drug safety scandals in the country: “These scandals are strong enough to show that the moral decay and loss of trust have reached an extremely serious point.”12 Wen further argued: “A country that fails to embody the high moral standards of its citizens can never become a truly powerful country or a respected nation.”13 Xi Jinping, expressing a similar sense of foreboding at the Politburo’s first meeting under his leadership in 2012, referred pointedly to the rampant corruption among officials and its terrible impact on public confidence in the CCP: “Many facts tell us that corruption has become so widespread that it will ultimately destroy the party and the nation.”14

Chinese public sentiment offers a more comprehensive explanation of the aforementioned concerns of the CCP leadership. The crises of trust and morality, which are commonplace in Chinese daily life, are reflected today in general empirical facts, as observed by Gao Zhaoming, professor of ethics at Nanjing Normal University.15 In a large survey on “social diseases” in China

13. Ibid.
conducted in 2014, the “loss of trust” was ranked the top such condition. As many as 88 percent of respondents (60.2 percent fully agreed and 27.8 percent agreed somewhat) believed that China has been beset with a “social disease of moral decay and the loss of trust.” The country’s ethical and moral problems are all too clear from the long list of widely occurring phenomena such as commercial fraud, tax fraud, financial deception, shoddy and dangerous engineering projects, fake products, tainted milk, poisonous bread, toxic pills, and decline in professional ethics among teachers, doctors, lawyers, Buddhist monks, and especially government officials.

These seemingly anecdotal social phenomena are actually symptomatic of what He Huaihong calls two “worrying aspects of our moral miasma”: the “level of severity” and “the scale of the moral disruption.” The first concern is that corruption is widespread among all levels of government. It has infected not only senior leaders such as former minister of railways Liu Zhijun, former head of the State Energy Administration Bureau Liu Tienan, former police chief and Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang, and former vice chairman of the Central Military Commission Xu Caihou, each of whom was charged with stealing an exorbitant amount from state coffers. But even at lower levels, civil servants such as village heads, town heads, and local bank managers “are able to accumulate tens or even hundreds of millions of yuan in bribes. A district bureau chief may own dozens of houses” (see chapter 8).

As for the second worrying aspect, He Huaihong believes that corruption is not just a problem of governmental officials; it is a “failure of society” and signifies the collapse of ethical codes in the nation. Over the past decade, the Chinese media have reported countless terrible stories from daily life: in fear of legal liability or blackmail, bystanders offer no help when a little girl is hit by a car or an elderly person falls in the street (see chapter 1). As chapter 9 (“Chinese People: Why Are You So Angry?”) illustrates, the behavior on the streets can even turn savage. People who behave like this have one common characteristic: “They attempt to relieve their anger through violence. They try to use violence to solve their problems.” Even worse, when a female driver


17. Xu Jilin, “Ruhe chongjian Zhongguo de lunli yu Xinyang” [How to rebuild China’s ethics and faith], Jinrongjia [Financier], August 10, 2014 (http://chuansong.me/n/593505).
was severely beaten by a male driver in a recent road-rage incident in Chengdu and a video of it was posted online, a large number of social media commentaries blamed the female driver for her poor driving habits. As He Huaihong argues, all of these troubling phenomena indicate “fundamental trust and fundamental kindness are being lost in our society” (see chapter 8).

The breakdown in society’s value system is reflected in a nationwide survey on the spiritual life of contemporary Chinese people conducted in 2014 by the Modern Chinese Thought and Culture Research Institute at East China Normal University. Nearly 60 percent of the respondents agreed that “people’s values differ and therefore there should be no good or bad, right or wrong regarding moral issues.” As Xu Jilin, a prominent historian of Chinese thought who helped design this research tool, observed, this staggeringly high figure reflects the crisis of moral standards in today’s China.18

Similarly, a large number of Chinese scholars from diverse fields—law, sociology, politics, economics, and philosophy, as well as history—have expressed serious concern about moral decay and the loss of trust in contemporary China. According to Zhang Weiyiing, a prominent economist and former dean of the Guanghua School of Management at Peking University, “What China needs most is not law, but heavenly principles (tianli). There can be no genuine rule of law if its law neither complies with heavenly principles, nor does it speak to conscience.”19

In place of heavenly principles and law, some observers find present-day China sadly filled with “hidden rules” (qian guize, 潜规则), a term coined by Wu Si, a prominent historian and former chief executive editor of the popular magazine *China through the Ages* (*Yanhuang Chunqiu*).20 According to Wu Si, at a time of moral decline and loss of trust, “hidden rules” based on connections, favoritism, and unethical dealmaking tend to replace ethical codes and social norms. For example, as can happen in other countries, a young aspiring actor might follow such rules to his or her advantage to get a role in a film, on television, or in a play by granting sexual favors to the casting producer. “Hidden rules” have now penetrated virtually all aspects of Chinese public life.

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18. Ibid.


Even the field of education has been infected by corruption, as pointed out by Zi Zhongyun, former director of the Institute of American Studies at CASS who served as an interpreter for both Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. In a widely viewed 2014 media interview in China, she recounted an extraordinary story about a middle school student who was caught cheating but whose father accused the school of being unfair to his son. In a quite bizarre (but also thought-provoking) fashion, the father reasoned: for a kid from a nonofficial family who had no privileges or special access, cheating was the only “fair game.” The father claimed the school’s crackdown on cheating meant “there would be no fairness at all for kids who come from humble families.”

According to Zi, the moral decay of the Chinese nation, especially as it has already penetrated into the critically important domain of education, is “very sad and enormously frightening.”

For Sun Liping, a distinguished professor of sociology at Tsinghua University, the defining predicament that confronts the country is rooted in “social decay” (shehui kuibai). In his view, the greatest threat to China is not social unrest, but social decay. Whereas most analysts of China (both domestic and foreign) are concerned about mass protests and serious tensions between interest groups, Sun is more worried about social decay, which at its core indicates the abuse of power. In China today, argues Sun, power is neither constrained by external forces in society nor controlled by any internal mechanism. As a result, corruption has not only reached an unprecedentedly large scale among officials but has also spawned a wide assortment of social phenomena such as unrestrained interest groups, serious erosion of social equity and justice, the convergence of money and power, the loss of professional ethics, and a decline in basic moral standards. All of these problems, says Sun, reflect the fundamental flaw of China’s market reform: the failure to reestablish value objectives for a renewed civilization.


22. Ibid.

Two main factors—or historical circumstances—have contributed to moral decay in present-day China. First, Mao’s philosophy of violent class struggle, especially the violent Red Guard movement during the Cultural Revolution, had a detrimental effect on the country’s ethical foundation. By way of illustration, in his discussion of Red Guard violence, He Huaihong mentions an incident that might be incomprehensible to those unaware of the details of the Cultural Revolution: “Another Red Guard group had caught someone that they claimed was an ‘old conservative boss.’ They shot him in the head in front of a hotel and then went to eat inside, leaving the body in the street. All evening, going in and out of the hotel, they just pretended not to see it” (see chapter 6). It was astonishing that this sort of humiliation, torture, and murder occurred in public, before the eyes of so many people. The Cultural Revolution was an extraordinary period during which children condemned parents, husbands betrayed wives, and students tortured teachers—all for political and ideological reasons. In its aftermath many Chinese asked themselves how they could believe or trust anyone in authority after such a dark age in recent Chinese history.

The intellectual ferment in the post-Mao era from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, especially its critical reflection on the decade-long political fanaticism and human suffering of the Cultural Revolution, led to the subsequent call for humanism.24 In a sense, the Chinese discussion of humanism represented a search for an ethical and moral awakening. Unfortunately, this movement toward enlightenment did not last long, partly because of the government’s crackdown on large-scale public discourse on the political and ethical sources of the turmoil. The famous writer Ba Jin’s appeal for the establishment of a Cultural Revolution museum, for example, was sadly rejected. The search for ethical awakening came to a halt mainly because the nation was caught up in another overwhelmingly rapid socioeconomic transformation—market reform, also recognized as the era of money worship (see chapter 7).

Money worship, He Huaihong believes, is another factor contributing to the crisis of faith and moral decay.25 Today, four decades after Mao’s death, China is very different, not only in its national character but also in that of

24. The call for humanism in the post-Mao era was most evident in the literature. Representative works include Dai Houying “Ren a ren” [Stones in the wall], Huacheng [City of Flowers], No. 11 (November), 1980; Dai Houying, Shiren zhisi [Death of a poet] (Shanghai: Taibai wenyi chubanshe, 1994); and Lu Xinhua, “Shanghen” [Scar], Wenhui Daily, August 11, 1978.

its individuals. As a nation, China is set to become an economic giant on the world stage; perhaps it is one already (see chapter 4). But it fails to show the world its true values and beliefs. As individuals, “Chinese now have drummed up their purses, but their spirit tends to be empty,” in the words of Zi Zhongyun.26 Extensive interviews with Chinese people in various walks of life led Evan Osnos, former foreign correspondent in Beijing for the New Yorker, to a similar observation: “The Cultural Revolution dismantled China’s ancient belief systems, and the economic revolution that followed could not rebuild them. Prosperity had yet to define the ultimate purpose of the nation and the individual. There was a hole in Chinese life that people called the *jingshen kongxu*—‘the spiritual void.’”27

A well-known Chinese saying vividly captures the ramifications of the spiritual and moral decay in present-day China from a historical perspective: “China lost its Middle Kingdom with the end of the Ming; its Han ethnicity with its conquest by the Qing; its faith with the Cultural Revolution; and its morality with economic reform.”28

Not all Chinese ethicists and public intellectuals agree with the negative assessment of the current status of ethics. As some point out, moral decay was talked about even back in the ancient time of the Middle Kingdom. As early as the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BCE), when etiquette and a code of ethics were closely observed, the “disintegration of propriety” (*libeng yuehuai*) was a growing concern. And throughout the entire twentieth century, if not earlier, writers in both China and abroad described the “deep-rooted bad habits” of the Chinese people (*guomin liegenxing*).29 These are most evident in some of Lu Xun’s well-known fictional characters. The provocative writings of the Taiwanese author Bo Yang, especially his famous book *The Ugly Chinaman*, reaffirmed this long-standing criticism of China’s...
ethical and cultural norms. According to some PRC critics, the influential works of Lu Xun, Bo Yang, and others have helped create a value-laden and biased dichotomy between Confucian ethical rubbish and Western ethical essence. This, they say, has given rise to “a die-hard lie” both about Chinese culture and about the status of ethics in China today, for the Chinese are neither better nor more abhorrent than any other nationals in terms of barbarism, ignorance, tyranny, and cruelty. As an anonymous Chinese scholar concludes, “The crimes conducted by the Chinese during the past century could not be worse than the crimes and atrocities inflicted on various groups of indigenous populations by colonial racists in world history.”

Some other Chinese scholars have tried to downplay the extreme depth of moral decay in today’s China by pointing out that major socioeconomic transformation and political change are bound to have an impact on a country. As world history makes clear, a nation in the throes of rapid socioeconomic transformation is likely to experience some sort of spiritual and ethical crisis. As one Chinese scholar has observed, the former Soviet Union and other post-Communist Eastern European countries all experienced such a crisis and saw the cult of money worship take hold during their socioeconomic and political transitions. The same could be said of many European countries in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and the United States from 1865 to 1914, when Americans went through the periods of Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era, marked by rapid industrialization and a surge in immigration.

Tu Weiming, former director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute at Harvard University and currently a professor of philosophy at Peking University, believes that the ongoing Chinese discourse on morality could not only bring ethics back into critical focus but also encourage the Chinese to rethink their tradition, especially Confucianism, in a more positive light. According to

30. Lu Xun, The True Story of Ah-Q (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1960); and Bo Yang, Choulou de zhongguoren [The Ugly Chinaman] (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban, 2009).
31. “Guomin liegenxing.”
34. Ibid.
Tu, of the five spiritual leaders who shaped civilizations around the world—Confucius, Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed—only Confucius has suffered constant maligning in contemporary China. Among the civilizations existing at the same time, according to Tu, only the Chinese civilization has continued for 5,000 years without interruption. In Tu’s view, this remarkable continuity stems from the Confucian tradition, and Confucian ethical codes for individual behaviors will likely become part of the common language of citizens of the world in the twenty-first century.

Some Chinese scholars find that the ongoing intellectual discourse on morality in China is itself a very encouraging development. While the field of philosophy has been largely marginalized around the world in recent decades, its subfield of ethics seems to have attracted an increasing number of Chinese scholars and students. Li Zehou, Chen Jiaying, and Li Meng, for example, represent three different generations of distinguished Chinese philosophers whose important works in ethics have enriched this subfield. For He Huaihong, critical views of ethics, culture, politics, and history (as exemplified in the above discussion) have significantly broadened his horizon.

This review of Chinese concerns and debates about the country’s ethical status provides a broad context in which to assess He Huaihong’s scholarly work. The intellectual journey that He has undertaken is understandably very challenging. He needs to address tough questions, both politically and intellectually, regarding individual moral standards versus social ethics, morality versus legality, personal responsibility versus institutional accountability, and cultural pluralism versus universal values. More important, He Huaihong strives to reconstruct a new intellectual framework of Chinese social ethics. A discussion of the personal and professional experiences of this leading Chinese ethicist will provide more clues about what he hopes to accomplish in China’s search for a new ethical order.

36. Tu, “Rujia renwen jingshen de pushi jiazhì.”
37. Ibid.
39. For their representative works, see Li Zehou, Lunlixue gangyao [Outline of ethics] (Beijing: Remin ribao chubanshe, 2010); Chen Jiaying, Hewei lianghao shenghuo [What is the good life?] (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi chubanshe, 2015); and Li Meng, Ziran shehui [Nature society] (Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2015).
He Huaihong and His Search for a Philosophy of Life

He Huaihong was born in a rural area of Qingjiang County (now Zhangshu City), Jiangxi Province, in December 1954. The Cultural Revolution began just as he was entering middle school. As a teenager, he worked as a porter in Nanchang County, Jiangxi Province, for a year. He belongs to the so-called lost generation, the age cohort born in the 1950s, and his formative years coincided with the “decade of political turmoil” (1966–76). In his pre-college education, which included classical Chinese and history, He Huaihong was largely self-taught. In 1972, at eighteen, He was recruited to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and was stationed in an economically disadvantaged region of Inner Mongolia for six years.40

In 1979 he was transferred from Inner Mongolia to Shanghai, where he later attended an eighteen-month program at the Political Institute of the Air Force. There he spent most of his time studying English and reading scholarly works by both Chinese and Western authors. Like most of his generation, He Huaihong never had formal training in any foreign language, but he was very fond of languages. Reading foreign language materials, especially literature and intellectual history, served as the wonderful window, or in He's words, “a magnificent door,” opening into an entirely new world.41 As a young man who had just escaped the “long imprisonment in an intellectual desert filled with dogmatic worship,” He Huaihong was thirsty for knowledge and was very receptive to anything foreign and fresh.42 As he later recalled, at that time he could even recite many parts of Ernest Hemingway’s novel The Old Man and the Sea in English. In the late 1980s, He taught himself Latin, French, and German.

After graduating from the Political Institute of the Air Force, He Huaihong began teaching at the Air Force Academy in Beijing in the fall of 1980. When he was demobilized in the early 1980s, he briefly worked as a researcher at the Academy of Social Sciences of Jiangxi Province in Nanchang. In 1984 he took the entrance examination for graduate school and enrolled in the ethics program (first for a master’s degree and then for a doctoral degree) at Renmin University in Beijing. The university was very strong in the social sciences and humanities, including philosophy and ethics.

40. Part of this discussion about the personal and professional life of He Huaihong is based on He Huaihong, Zixuan ji [Selected works] (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2000).
41. He, Zixuan ji, p. 338.
42. Ibid.
The post–Cultural Revolution years were an exciting period in which young Chinese were extremely enthusiastic about absorbing Western liberal ideas. This was a time when the old faith and attitudes had collapsed while new ones were yet to be established. Unlike their counterparts in today’s China who may not be bothered by the lack of ideological beliefs, college students and young professionals at that time often felt something important missing in their lives. During that period, He Huaihong became profoundly interested in the works of Western philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls. He was curious about many long-standing issues: how the interaction between human beings and the environment shapes human relationships, the differences between moralities across cultures, the true meaning of Chinese national character, how to evaluate ethics through cross-cultural comparisons, and the circumstances in which a new set of ethical codes in a given country can be established.

During this time, He Huaihong began to think he would devote his career to the study of ethics. What attracted him to the field is its concern with the “philosophy of life” (rensheng zhexue) and focus on people. His first book, titled *Contemplating Life: Comments on Pascal* and published in 1988, is about the seventeenth-century French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Blaise Pascal. This legendary intellectual giant not only made great contributions to science but also produced some groundbreaking works for the important philosophies that emerged in the following centuries, such as existentialism, pragmatism, and voluntarism. He Huaihong was particularly intrigued by the way in which Pascal dealt with philosophical paradoxes such as between infinity and limit, faith and reason, and death and life. The following remarks make clear the impact of Pascal’s work on He Huaihong’s own philosophical view: “Human beings are finite space-time existences, but they seek to reach beyond their own limitations to become infinite. It is when people feel limited in the face of [the] infinite, that they sense their trivialness, and feel a mysterious fear and trembling. Yet, people will never give up and relax their efforts.”

43. Ibid., p. 349.
44. Ibid.
of state, the greatness of spirit and thought, and the greatness of benevolence and kindness—has greatly influenced He Huaihong’s philosophy.46

Throughout He Huaihong’s career—whether in his academic writings or wider public outreach, whether in his painstaking efforts to reestablish a new ethical order for China, or in his call for a Chinese ethical dialogue with the West and the world—the philosophy of life, or the principle of life, is always a central theme (see chapter 11). He believes that “whether Chinese or foreign, ancient or modern, life should always be the first and foremost concern.”47 He Huaihong highlights three reasons for his pursuit. First, “life is the primary and most fundamental value of humanity; it is the precondition for all other human values.” Second, “life is precious in itself—that is, it is precious as an end in itself, not just as a means.” And third, “the life of every person is equally valuable” (see chapter 18).

In the summer of 1982, He Huaihong read the English translation of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness and became fascinated with existentialism, particularly Sartre’s two types of being: “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself.” While “being-in-itself” can only be approximated by human beings, “being-for-itself” is the being of consciousness. This concept has greatly influenced He Huaihong’s own work, especially his theory of conscience and the notion of “minimum moral standards.” Over the following years, He delved more deeply into the works of other important proponents of existentialism such as Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, and especially two of its pioneers in the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. Their works helped He Huaihong eventually depart from Sartre’s more extremist views of self-being in the realization that Sartre’s philosophy is “too far away from reality, and too far from the lives of real people.”48

In his early professional career, He Huaihong made an exceptional contribution to the dissemination of Western ideas and values in China through translation. He translated nine important classic books on ethics into Chinese, totaling approximately 1.6 million words.49 In addition to the aforementioned The Meditations by Marcus Aurelius (1989), he translated or cotranslated Introduction to Ethics by Frank Thilly (1987), Moral Maxims by

48. He, Zixuan ji, pp. 343–44.
François de La Rochefoucauld (1987), *A System of Ethics* by Friedrich Paulsen (1988), *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* by Robert Nozick (1991), and *On Tyranny* by Leo Strauss (2006). Among Chinese scholars and students of ethics and philosophy, He Huaihong is widely considered the primary translator who introduced John Rawls’s masterpiece *A Theory of Justice* (1989, 2001, 2009) to Chinese readers. Besides his scholarly contributions and translations in the field of philosophy and ethics, He Huaihong has published a large number of commentaries for general Chinese readership on a wide variety of topics such as Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels, Jean-Paul Sartre’s plays, and José Ortega y Gasset’s essays.

Despite his extensive research and publications on Western philosophy and foreign cultures as a young scholar in the 1980s, He Huaihong did not forsake his study of Chinese philosophy and traditional culture. He was keenly aware of the need to make up for all of the lost years in his educational development due to the Cultural Revolution. He called his age cohort “the generation growing up with a deep fracture in Chinese tradition and culture.” He undertook a strictly planned study of important Chinese classics and read very extensively all major works on traditional ethics, ranging from the main classics in pre-Qin, pre-Wei and Jin, and pre-Sui and Tang eras as well as those from the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. As He Huaihong later recalled, this decade-long “educational make-up” gave him a “more comprehensive understanding of the main elements of Chinese history and culture as well as its origins and ramifications.”

In his doctoral dissertation, “Contract Ethics and Social Justice” (1990), He Huaihong explored the philosophical logic among propositions about life preservation, promotion of law, property rights, and equal distribution of profits, all in the name of justice. He also analyzed the contrasting priorities between equality and liberty in light of the debate between John Rawls and Robert Nozick. This discussion had strong relevance for China in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the private sector reemerged. One year before receiving his Ph.D. degree, He began teaching philosophy and ethics at the China Youth University for Political Sciences in Beijing. He spent one year at Harvard University as a visiting scholar in 1993–94, which he calls the “most pleasant and productive year of learning and reading in my career.” During this period of foreign study he learned to recognize the importance of cul-

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49. Ibid., p. 346.
50. Ibid., p. 353.
51. Ibid., p. 356.
52. Ibid., p. 348.
tural pluralism and the imperative for diversity and mutual respect in a glob-
alized world. After he returned to China, He taught at the Institute of Chi-

In 1994 He Huaihong wrote *A Theory of Conscience: The Transformation of
Traditional Morality in the New Society*—his most important book on Chi-
nese ethics, as he described in the preface to the 2009 edition. This book
has been widely seen as "a groundbreaking work in the study of the Chinese
traditional philosophy." Partly because of the book’s great contribution to
the field of philosophy and ethics, Peking University’s Department of Philo-
osphy recruited He Huaihong to its faculty in 1998. He has been a full pro-
fessor in the department ever since and previously also served as the director
of the department’s Ethics Program for many years. As He Huaihong points
out, Peking University was the cradle of the contemporary Chinese study of
ethics. Established in 1912, the Department of Philosophy had many lead-
ing scholars serving on its faculty over the century, including Cai Yuanpei,
Hu Shi, Jiang Menglin, Xiong Shili, Liang Shuming, Feng Youlan, Zhu
Guangqian, Zhang Dainian, and Tang Yi-jie. The founders of the CCP, Chen
Duxiu and Li Dazhao, taught in the department in their early careers. The
first contemporary Chinese textbook on ethics was written by Liu Shipei, the
first book on the history of Chinese ethics was written by Cai Yuanpei, and
the first Chinese book on comparative ethics was written by Huang
Jianzhong—all three of whom served as professors of philosophy at Peking
University at the time of publication.

In the past two decades, the department has recruited a num-
ber of internationally known scholars, including Rainer Schäfer, who previously taught
at University of Heidelberg and University of Bonn, and the aforementioned
Tu Weiming. Inspired by both the great tradition in the study of philosophy at Peking
University and extensive exposure to Western schools of thought

53. Ibid., p. 349.
54. He Huaihong, *Liangxin lun* [A theory of conscience], revised ed. (Beijing: Peking
55. Shao Zijie, “Zhou Zhixing duihua He Huaihong: Fenlie shidai de zuidi xiandu
gongshi” [Zhou Zhixing’s dialogue with He Huaihong: minimum consensus at a time of
split], Consensus Net, August 13, 2011 (http://21ccom.net/articles/sxwh/shsc/article_
2011081343175.html).
56. He Huaihong, *Shengsheng dade* [The great virtue of life-giving] (Beijing: Peking
57. Ibid.
through professional exchanges, He Huaihong has been remarkably prolific in his intellectual pursuits over the past two decades.

He Huaihong is also one of very few Chinese scholars who incorporate a grasp of Chinese ethical theories with broad expertise in the culture, history, religion, literature, and politics of the country. His study of the circulation of Chinese elites over time, or what he calls the dynamics between “the hereditary society” and “the selection society” (Chinese meritocracy) provides a new perspective on China’s 3,000-year history, pointing to the development of a unique sociopolitical structure—a system that holds cultural and intellectual elites in high regard and has promoted social mobility and equal opportunities.58 While the system was certainly not free from the abuse of power, nepotism, factionalism, and corruption, traditional China did establish a “true selection society in which learning was for the purpose of advancement and the ruling elite was selected from the best scholars” (see chapter 3). As He Huaihong has documented, throughout China’s long history the door to membership in the ruling class was often open to those of humble origins. In the Ming dynasty, for example, over 50 percent of officials (jinshi) were born into three-generation nonofficial families.59 This historical fact, He Huaihong argues, shows that China was a part of the global march toward modernity in Tocqueville’s terms, as it reflects a shift toward equality (see chapter 3).

In the past decade, He Huaihong has become more conscious of his role as an ethicist in a country searching for cultural and ethical rejuvenation. Hence he has written several nonacademic books for general readership emphasizing the centrality of life in ethical discourse and has been an active participant in the public discourse on ethics in the news media.60 In the early 2000s, for example, he wrote several dozen essays in his column “Bottom-Line Ethics” in the popular newspaper New Beijing Daily, commenting on a wide range of ethical and moral issues such as animal rights, the death penalty, and respect for minority groups (see chapter 13).61 His most important objectives, as He explicitly asserts, are “to tell stories about our own hist-

58. He, Zixuan ji, p. 358.
Minimum Moral Standards and Maximum Ethical Concerns

Arguably the most important contribution that He Huaihong has made to the field of ethics is twofold: his theoretical concept of minimum moral standards, on the one hand, and his broad and multidisciplinary approach to promoting maximum ethical concerns, on the other.

Minimum Moral Standards: Universal Ethics

During the past half-century, if not longer, Chinese society has repeatedly and continually failed to observe minimum moral standards. In He Huaihong’s words, that failure “threatens the very foundation of our society” (see chapter 10). In He’s view, it is imperative for the Chinese nation to hold the bottom line in ethical codes and social norms. Over the past two decades, the phrase most frequently used in his scholarly writing and public outreach is “minimum moral standards” (dixian lunli, 底线伦理). There are a number of English translations of He Huaihong’s concept of minimum moral standards, including “bottom-line ethics,” “minimalist ethics,” and “moral minimalism.” He Huaihong has substantially advanced the theory of minimum moral standards, especially by combining it with Chinese traditional philosophy. He divides minimum moral standards into three categories: first, the basic natural and social responsibilities that every person must meet; second, standards associated with laws and social institutions; and third, professional

62. He, Zixuan ji, p. 341.
63. For a more detailed discussion of the conceptual development of minimum moral standards, see He, Shengsheng dade, p. 193.
64. Ibid., p. 192.
ethics and morality of specific areas of human activity, for example, government and the Internet (see chapter 10).

He Huaihong argues that society and individuals should all fulfill their own responsibilities. For society, these fall in the realm of social justice while for individuals they pertain to basic obligations, the foremost being “respect for human life and liberty.” Furthermore, minimum moral standards should be (1) perpetual (in the sense of “continuity between traditional society and modern”), honored all the time; (2) objective, not subject to changes in different circumstances; and (3) universal, beyond cultural and ethnic boundaries.

The first of these traits, He Huaihong believes, has ties to the Chinese traditional concept of conscience (liangxin, 良心 or liangzhi, 良知), which was thought to guide individuals in the development of basic moral and ethical codes. In A Theory of Conscience, He systematrically explores traditional culture’s great attention to these basic moral standards and its view that conscience is a natural and inherent gift. This is reflected in the remarks of early Chinese philosopher Mencius, for example, who noted that “humans all have the feeling of compassion.”

Traditional Chinese ethics also provides rational reasons why a consensus on minimum moral standards is both feasible and desirable. Confucius’s motto “Do not do unto others what you would not have done to yourself” speaks loud and clear about the rationality of such a consensus. He Huaihong agrees that a human being’s fundamental sense of compassion, sympathy, and responsibility is real, “but it is often weakened by a range of influences to the point that it no longer disciplines us and drives our conduct” (see chapter 1). Therefore he claims that “we need to work on every level of our consciousness: beliefs, emotions, rationality, experience, intuition. We must not reject any idea on any level that could help us in our fight to improve the environment. And we must hope that no matter how minimal it may be, we can find some broad-based consensus and broad-based will to act” (see chapter 15).


67. He, Liangzhi lun, p. 7.

68. “Ceyin zhixin, renjieyouzhi” [恻隐之心,人皆有之].

69. “Jisuo buyu, wushi yuren” [己所不欲,勿施于人].
As for the second trait, He Huaihong argues that because minimum moral standards are based on objective criteria, they should not be subject to change and cannot be decreased. Otherwise, these standards would be more like “springboards” (tanhuang) rather than a “bottom line” (dixian).70 That is to say, they are basic global norms that aim to ban murder, theft, fraud, and rape and call for a compassionate and humane approach to other people.71 Because these ethical codes are so basic and minimal, they are able to reach the maximum range of consensus.

This emphasis on objectivity leads to the notion of universal ethics (pubian lunli, 普遍伦理), the third trait of He Huaihong’s theory of minimum moral standards. In He’s view, such standards should apply equally to all individuals, all groups, all classes, and all nations without exception.72 This does not mean that human values around the world are or should be the same. In He’s words, “People’s values and ultimate concerns are varied; they may contradict and even clash with each other” (see chapter 2). He Huaihong reasons that an ethical system consists of two main components: normative principles and value-based beliefs, so that “when we consider universal ethics, we must give priority to the norms of moral behavior rather than value systems” (see chapter 2).

At the same time, He Huaihong firmly believes in universal values (pushi jiazhi, 普世价值) and argues that universal ethics are achievable for the very reason that some values are shared universally. For He Huaihong, “human nature does not vary much in this world” and “traditional Chinese moral habits bear creditable comparison with those of any culture in the world” (see chapter 8). He also believes that values, like ideas, can be disseminated across national borders. In a recent article on American democracy and constitutionalism, He Huaihong stated that the May Fourth Movement disseminated many Western ideas into China, including not only Marxism, but also so-called Mr. Democracy, Mr. Science, Mr. Law, and Mr. Morality.73 Some of these concepts have notably stirred intellectual discourse in twentieth-century China. In He’s

71. Shao, “Zhou Zhixing duihua He Huaihong,”
72. Ibid.
73. He Huaihong, “Meiquo shi you yige guannian chansheng de guojia, zhege guannian jushi ‘Duli Xuanyan’” [The United States is a country that was born with a concept, and that concept is called the Declaration of Independence] Fenghuang dushu [Phoenix Reading], November 26, 2013 (http://chuansong.me/n/240070).
words, “without reference to Western ideas, a modern and contemporary Chinese history would not know where to start. These ideas and values have been deeply assimilated into our daily lives and various institutions.”

In a sense, while minimum moral standards are not subject to change, ideological values, cultural norms, and social ethics in a given country do change, sometimes quite profoundly. Cong Riyun, a well-known public intellectual and professor at the China University of Political Science and Law, recently asked an intriguing question: Which “cultural gap” is bigger: the one between present-day China and present-day United States, or that between China today and the China of 200 years ago? Cong’s answer was undoubtedly the latter, as he jokingly said that more than half of the women in the country today would probably commit suicide if required to live in nineteenth-century China. This point illustrates the impact of the dissemination of Western values in China over the past couple of centuries.

He Huaihong’s concept of minimum moral standards not only provides a realistic paradigm to deal with moral decay in Chinese society, but also aims to reaffirm universal ethics and universal values—notions that have unfortunately been rejected by most Chinese leaders and conservative intellectuals.

Maximum Ethical Concerns: Political and Cultural Transformation

Some critics argue that He Huaihong’s emphasis on ethics may divert public attention from the problems of China’s political system. For example, Hou Shuyi, a professor of law at the Shandong Institute of Technology, refers to He’s “moral self-discipline” (daode zilü) as wishful thinking. Hou states one should not overlook the fact that Confucian ethics were the ideological basis

74. Ibid.
76. One exception in the Chinese leadership is Wen Jiabao, who wrote an important article on the challenges confronting Chinese foreign policy. In it, he argued that things such as democracy, rule of law, freedom, and human rights are not something peculiar to Western countries. Rather, they are common values pursued by mankind and therefore should be seen as universal values, to which China should also adhere. See Wen Jiabao, “Our Historical Tasks at the Primary Stage of Socialism and Several Issues Concerning China’s Foreign Policy,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China Website, February 26, 2007 (http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/ziliao_611306/tytj_611312/zcwj_611316/z300993.shtml).
77. Hou Shuyi, “Beida jiaoshou He Huaihong tan daode cai zui budaode” [Peking University Professor Huaihong’s view of morality as the most immoral], Hexun Net, October 10, 2007 (http://opinion.hexun.com/2007-10-10/100865161.html).
of autocratic imperial rule and were invoked to maintain the legitimacy and order of the feudal system. Moreover, unless institutional restraint and legal mechanisms are given priority, any discussion of ethics could be highly misleading and certainly would not prevent moral decay. In Hou’s view, good governance in a given country is not based on moral self-discipline, but relies on sound and sustainable political institutions.\textsuperscript{78}

He Huaihong does recognize both the flaws of traditional Chinese ethics and the political and institutional factors behind moral decay in present-day China. As he observes, “In traditional morality, the most important elements are not attitudes and behaviors among individuals or between an individual and society, but self-knowledge, self-development, and moral self-perfection” (see chapter 2). He Huaihong considers morality “to be mainly the morality of society and social norms.” Ethics refers not to individual ethics (\textit{geren daode}) but first and foremost to institutional ethics (\textit{zhidu lunli}), meaning the justice of the institutional system—how it constrains the behaviors of individuals, especially those who are in power.\textsuperscript{79} He Huaihong states explicitly that “in today’s world, if we wish to protect our safety and our dignity, rule of law is the only option” (see chapter 9). As for individuals, He believes that ethical awakening is actually the “people’s awakening” or “individual liberalization,” which should involve a transformation in the relationship between the state, society, communities, and individuals.

He Huaihong has been openly critical of excessive interference in societal autonomy and individual liberty by the PRC’s political powers (see chapter 14). In his view, this interference has destroyed part of the country’s traditional ethical foundation and has caused other remaining parts to lose their constraining power.\textsuperscript{80} He finds that even the Chinese leadership’s recent efforts to promote ethical reconstruction usually do not take into consideration the need for autonomy in ethical discourse. Just as morality should not operate in place of institutions and law, it should have its own function, for example, in achieving consensus in society on the basis of the aforementioned minimum moral standards.\textsuperscript{81} In He’s view, the mixing of political

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{79} Xu Linling, “He Huaihong: Xunqiu jiduan zhijian de zongdao he houdao” [He Huaihong: Seeking kindness and the middle-way between extremes], Nanfang renwu zhoukan [Southern people weekly], November 10, 2013, and also http://www.nfpeople.com/story_view.php?id=4958.

\textsuperscript{80} Dao, “Du He Huaihong Xin gangchang.”

\textsuperscript{81} Wang, “He Huaihong.”
propaganda and ideological doctrines with ethical discussion does not resonate well with the Chinese public.\textsuperscript{82}

In 2005, eight years before President Xi Jinping launched his bold political campaign against official corruption, He Huaihong outlined six integrated measures to deal with this rampant problem: (1) make it harder (\textit{buneng}), (2) make it riskier (\textit{bugan}), (3) make it unnecessary (\textit{bubi}), (4) make it contemptible (\textit{buxie}), (5) make it shameful (\textit{buren}), and (6) make it undesirable (\textit{buyu}). Ultimately, He calls for a set of broad-ranging, systemwide efforts to curtail corruption, including ”a constitutional set of checks and balances” (see chapter 12).

Along with this much-needed political transformation, He Huaihong proposes the establishment of new moral principles (\textit{xin gangchang}, 新纲常), including the following three: “the people set guidelines for the government” (\textit{minwei zhenggang}, 民为政纲), “rightness sets guidelines for human beings” (\textit{yiwei rengang}, 义为人纲), and “the living set guidelines for all things” (\textit{shengwei wugang}, 生为物纲). Next he proposes five new constants borrowed from “virtues identified in the classics”: benevolence (\textit{ren}), rightness (\textit{yi}), ritual (\textit{li}), wisdom (\textit{zhi}), and faithfulness (\textit{xin})—as well as five redefined relationships (chapter 5). He calls for a new cultural transformation in a rapidly changing sociopolitical environment in twenty-first century China and in a new and challenging ecological condition in the world (see chapter 1).

He Huaihong identifies many important differences between the old and new moral principles. The new ethics represents a move toward equality between people and requires that those of high status do their duty by those of low status: that is to say, those who govern should be accountable to the citizens. The new ethics also highlights the importance of environmental protection. As some commentators observe, He Huaihong’s new principles reflect his deep ethical concern about governance in modern society.\textsuperscript{83}

Although these new principles are directed primarily at the Chinese people, they reflect He Huaihong’s profound interest in placing Chinese ethical discourse in a global perspective and in having “an academic dialogue on an equal footing with the West and the world.”\textsuperscript{84} Some of the chapters in this volume concern ethical duty in international relations, especially since this is a period in which weapons of mass destruction, environmental and ecological challenges, ethnic cleansing, widespread violence and terrorism, cybersecurity, and other issues constitute serious threats to the survival of

\textsuperscript{82} Xu, “He Huaihong.”

\textsuperscript{83} Dao, “Du He Huaihong Xin gangchang.”

\textsuperscript{84} He, \textit{Zixuan ji}, p. 359.
humankind (see chapters, 16, 17, and 18). As He points out, “Our material and military power is at an extraordinary peak, but the spiritual and cultural bonds that keep us connected to one another have never been weaker” (chapter 19).

He Huaihong’s global perspective and his keen interest in having a Chinese ethical dialogue with the West spring not only from his familiarity with Western ethics but also from the Chinese sentiment that Western ethical theories have a strong sense of exclusivity. In the eyes of many non-Western countries, Western modernity reflects military and economic conquest, colonial rule, and Western centrism in the cultural domain.85 In a way, the international dialogue on ethical issues that He Huaihong and his like-minded Chinese scholars seek can promote cross-cultural understanding.

While this volume focuses on the intellectual odyssey of one truly extraordinary Chinese ethicist, it is also about the broader experience of China’s journey into the twenty-first century—about the country’s painful attempt to recover from the severe moral decay caused by the destruction of Chinese ethical principles over the last century. Readers will, of course, arrive at their own opinions on He Huaihong’s assessment of China’s present-day ethical status and the utility of his proposed new ethical principles. One can safely say, however, that the ongoing Chinese ethical discourse is among the most important factors that will determine the prospects, trajectory, and implications of China’s rise on the world stage. The general English-speaking readership and analysts in the China field in particular will be richly rewarded for being well informed about this Chinese ethical discourse—and indeed, the philosophical and political insights thoughtfully presented in the following pages.