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China from Empire to Nation-State

Any effort to research history that strays too far from specific linguistic contexts and written texts in order to reduce a problem to a simple conclusion is bound to sacrifice too much historical sensibility. This introduction thus does not offer a thoroughgoing discussion of all of the contents of *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought*, but rather draws out some theoretical issues that emerge from the process of the analysis of history and provides them to the reader as a reference for reading the entire book. My discussion focuses on two self-reflexive questions: First, what meanings are contained in the term “China” (especially “modern” China)? I am not referring to a history of the concept of “China,”¹ but an attempt to answer the following questions: What is the nature of the historical emergence or construction of modern Chinese identity, ideas of geography, and senses of sovereignty? No discussion of modern Chinese thought can avoid such a historical understanding of “China” (*Zhongguo*). Second, how do we understand China’s “modern” (*Zhongguode xiandai*)? The concept of the “modern” is of course a term of self-affirmation used by modern people, a way for modern people to differentiate themselves from the ancients and their world. “Modern,” then, is a differentiating concept—a way of dividing history into different eras and forms. What, then, is held in the transformations in thought to which this self-affirmation leads? Indeed, what forms the basis of this modern identity? Or, what exactly are the conditions that make it possible to draw dividing lines in history? No discussion of modern Chinese thought can avoid this

self-understanding of the “modern.” These two questions can be discussed through many different fields and approaches. The analysis in this book approaches these questions from a limited perspective—the perspective of intellectual history. I discuss the first question through an analysis of historical narratives about China, and begin an analysis of the second question by exploring the interaction between the worldviews of Heavenly Principle (*tianli*) and Universal Principle (*gongli*).