

## **Dawn of the Pacific Century**

Wang Hui, Tsinghua University

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In collaborazione con Fondazione Berggruen Institute Europe

### **Biography**

Professor Wang is Distinguished Professor of Literature and History and the founding Director of the Tsinghua Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He earned his PhD in Chinese Literature from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1988. From 1996 to 2007, he was the chief editor of *Dushu*, China's leading intellectual journal. His research spans Chinese intellectual history, Chinese literature, and social theory. Among his recent works are *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2023) and *China's Twentieth Century: Revolution, Retreat and the Road to Equality* (Verso Books, 2016).

### **Abstract**

#### **Dawn of the Pacific Century**

The popularity of the concept of “century” in Chinese is a contingent modern event. It was also a remote echo to the European fin de siècle. Rarely does the analysis of a time period line up exactly with the precise measure of a “century.” It is precisely because of this that historians have invented such concepts as “long century” and “short century,” so that a period could be defined by some details, events or some logic. Within all narratives of “century,” the 19th century has a special place where the 19th century implied the birth of a new world: The huge transformations in social life brought about by the scientific, technological, and cultural achievements of this period, the new geopolitical relations formed by the development of navigational technology, the governance model caused by the development of statistics and information technology, the new spiritual and mental outlook produced by the formal revolution in literature and the arts as well as the development of psychology and other fields, etc.. Yet within the path of China's history, the so-called 19th century was rather the period of the decline and metamorphosis of politics, economics, and culture from its peak during the Qianlong period. For China, if one wants to find an analogue to the 19th century of Europe, we can only direct our attention to the simultaneous extension and repudiation of the 19th century—the twentieth century. Through a look back at the birth of the category of the Twentieth century and its complex relation to Chinese intellectuals' analyses of imperialism around the year 1900, this talk establishes the intimate link between modern China's conception of “century” and the twentieth century. This concept was something different from the categorization of historical periods which had characterized the past, for it was an apprehension of a new and unique situation. During this singular historical moment, intellectuals could not avoid thinking about Europe's relation to the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and earlier, and they created a prehistory for modern China as a way of determining China's particular position within the global horizon. The second half of the talk (if time permits) centers on the intellectual debates of the early twentieth century, and delves into the ways in which this new period consciousness was expressed in political debates, historical research, and philosophical and religious narratives, such as the distinction between social forms along the axis of time, the distinction between different spatial understandings of China, the distinction between the nature of language as a means of communication versus self-expression within the internal domain, and within the dimension of transcendence, the debate between universalist religion and “correct belief.” Under the double shadows of imperialism and the Western discourse of “civilization,” Chinese intellectuals' exploration of particularity was a form of resistance against and deconstruction of the universalist narrative of history that rose with imperialism. Nonetheless, its basic direction was not toward affirming particularity, but rather toward reconstructing universalism.