The Journal of Hellenic Studies (2026), 1–18
doi:10.1017/S0075426926100585

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Philhellenism, mishellenism and classical reception in modern China

Zilong Guo

Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations, Northeast Normal University, China
Email: guozl144@nenu.edu.cn

Abstract

'Constantly commending Hellas' is a metaphorical expression coined by Mao Zedong to label Soviet-backed party rivals as 'philhellenic' during the 1941 party purge, reinforcing his leadership under the guise of the Sinification of Marxism. Following the communist conquest of China in 1949, the metaphor remained central to debates over 'Westernization versus Sinification'. It highlights tensions between philhellenism and mishellenism and provides a valuable lens to explore the intersection of classical reception and modern Chinese thought. This article traces 'Hellenomania' in China from the mid-19th-century colonial period to the post-Mao era and addresses issues of nationalism, ideological interpretation and intellectual autonomy. It argues that 'Hellenomania', which served as a historical resource for China's transition from a dynastic empire to a nation-state, has its roots in the intellectual tendency to view Euro-American modernity as descended from classical antiquity. Through five case studies of phil- or mishellenists, including Liang Qichao (1873–1929), Mao Zedong (1893–1976), Xiao Jun (1907–1988), Gu Zhun (1915–1974) and Lin Zhichun (1910–2007), the article explores their roles within the frameworks of classical reception and intellectual history.

Keywords: Greece; China; Mao Zedong; intellectual autonomy; reception of antiquity

I. Introduction

During his 1982 visit to China as president of the British Academy, Kenneth Dover found 'only four old men who could read Greek'.[1] However, back in the 1940s, Mao Zedong mentioned that there were many scholars in China 'constantly commending Hellas' (*yan bicheng Xila*).[2] How have 'Hellenomania' and 'Greeklessness' developed in China over the past 40 years? And how do we explain the paradoxical tensions in ideas about philhellenism and mishellenism? Scholars have devoted attention to Mao's mishellenist position, but none has examined its complex historical, political and cultural contexts in depth, let alone recognized it as key to understanding the reception of the classical world in China.[3] This can be more effectively grasped through detailed background analysis, extensive case studies and accessible translations of Chinese sources.

[1] Dover et al. (2023) 275.

[2] Mao (1961–1977) 3.19–20. It is useful to remember that in the Chinese system of nomenclature, the family name comes first. In this case, *Mao* is the family name, and *Zedong* is the personal name. For brevity and convenience, I have adopted the transcription system for Standard Mandarin (*pinyin*): so *Zedong* instead of the Wade–Giles romanization *Tse-tung*.

[3] Gao (2018) 218, 320, 351; Zhou (2022) 275–82; Bartsch (2023) 41–42.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

II. Inventing a political metaphor: mishellenism and the 1941 party purge

'Platonic men freed from the caves of Pao An want to spend their lives in the daylight, to hear the sound of industry borne on the wind,' sings Mao in John Adams' opera *Nixon in China*. Pao An was a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) headquarters in the mid-1930s, where American journalist Edgar Snow famously visited Mao. The aria, titled 'We No Longer Need Confucius', draws attention to the CCP's subversion of the traditional dynastic system and cultural heritage. The lyrics reflect the literary imagination of librettist Alice Goodman: by juxtaposing the Platonic cave with modern industrial civilization, she insightfully captures the intellectual undercurrents of Mao's era and key issues in modern Chinese history. One such issue is the view that Graeco-Roman civilizations serve as the precursors to modern Europe and America, suggesting that 'Western' modernity is a descendant of classical antiquity. The historical Mao referred to ancient Greece as the harbinger of Euro-American civilization during his meeting with Greek ambassadors in 1964. He also acknowledged the pivotal roles of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in the history of philosophy.[4] In his 1949 New Year's message, 'Carry the Revolution through to the End!', Mao alluded to Aesop's fable of 'The Farmer and the Viper' and likened anti-communist figures to 'snake-like scoundrels' unworthy of kindness or compassion.[5] Nevertheless, it makes sense that Mao did not make a positive reference to Plato during Nixon's 1972 visit if we consider the historical facts about him and the circumstances that shaped his ideology. In the early 1940s, Mao had criticized his party rivals as 'philhellenic', a label that came to be stigmatized in CCP discourse and continues to shape contemporary political rhetoric.

To put Mao's mishellenism in context, we need to recall the events leading up to it. On 19 May 1941, shortly before the Yan'an Rectification Movement (1942–1945) arose, Mao delivered the keynote speech 'Reform Our Study' at a meeting. He pointed out the sectarianism and dogmatism within the party and expressed concerns about the intellectual tendency to 'Hellenize' China:

> Many party members are still in a fog about Chinese history, whether of the last hundred years or of ancient times. There are many Marxist-Leninist scholars constantly commending Hellas; but as for their own ancestors, sorry, they have been forgotten. There is no climate of serious study of either current conditions or past history.[6]

Elsewhere Mao also considered many Chinese historians specializing in 'their own ancestors' to be 'muddle-headed', especially those serving the then-ruling Kuomintang government.[7] But Mao had something other than scholarship in mind. He thus polemically accused his party rivals who attended the meeting, particularly Wang Ming of the pro-Soviet faction, of using Russian dogmatism or 'Russianization' to poison young minds, and consolidated his own leadership of the party under the pretext of the Sinification of Marxism, which insists on preserving the uniqueness of local elements, such as concentrating on China's rural areas to encircle the cities and undertake radical agrarian revolutions. For the pro-Soviet faction, this contradicted the Marxian theories and had contributed to the establishment of a mere 'Peasants' Party', rather than one for the working class.[8] The consequences of the speech were readily apparent. It dealt a major

[4] CCP Central Documents Research Office (2013) 5.307, 313, 518.

[5] Mao (1961–1977) 4.304. Mao was Greekless, and we cannot determine which version he was referring to, as there have been no fewer than ten Chinese translations of Aesop since Matteo Ricci: Porteous (2024).

[6] Mao (1961–1977) 3.19, modified. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise noted. Compared to 'scholars who cannot open their mouths without citing ancient Greece', my translation is literal and adheres more closely to the wording of the Chinese original.

[7] Mao (1961–1977) 4.427–28.

[8] Gao (2018) 3–5.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

blow to Wang, who eventually chose a kind of voluntary exile in Moscow after the founding of the People's Republic of China. In *Fifty Years of the CCP*, Wang provided accounts missing in the party discourse and 'orthodox' historiography. In this self-defence, Wang referred to the Greek classics and Shakespeare to challenge Mao's literary and artistic perspectives. He aimed to refute the notion of economism or vulgar Marxism, which claims that literary and artistic works in a modern society with higher productivity are inherently superior to those of earlier eras like the Classical or Elizabethan.[9] But this fact alone does not allow us to characterize Wang as a philhellene. According to his memoirs, Mao confronted him in August 1943 and admitted that 'constantly commending Hellas' had indeed been directed against him:

> In my speech on the issue of the Rectification, I mentioned that there were some people constantly commending Hellas, and everyone knows that there are no such people in our party; we do have some people like you who constantly commend Lenin and Stalin, who constantly commend the Comintern and who constantly commend the Soviet Union. Therefore, no matter what you say, in action you are the most important representative of the pro-Moscow or pro-Soviet faction. This fact alone cannot be denied.[10]

It can be seen that Mao's metaphor was targeted not so much at classical reception as at the dogmatic application of 'Russified Marxism-Leninism' to China proper, and he generally bracketed the 'Russified' modernization in the category of 'Western' civilization that primarily includes modern Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, since the CCP was not fully established in the early 1940s and was heavily dependent on Soviet support, he had to be careful not to weaken the pro-Soviet faction by anything more than innuendo. Mao's tricky relationship with Stalin and Moscow dated back to the 1920s. Before the Rectification, he had almost seized control of the military command and personnel arrangement of the party, but the pro-Soviet faction still exerted influence in the ideological domain, especially the intellectual and literary circles in Yan'an. This forced Mao to back down. As early as 1928, Wang had spread the idea at Moscow's Sun Yat-sen University that 'Marxism-Leninism cannot come out of gullies.'[11] While Wang was a talented public speaker and had a good command of Russian, Mao struggled to speak fluent Mandarin due to his pronounced accent. When he was an assistant librarian at Peking University, Mao recalled, professors and students had often lacked the patience to listen to his 'southern dialect'.[12] This situation could be compared to Moscow as a metropolis and Yan'an as its rural province.

Wang, still the head of the Women's University of China in Yan'an, remained popular among bourgeois intellectuals and young students. His pamphlet *The Struggle for a More Bolshevikized CCP* gained widespread circulation and he himself regarded it as a significant contribution to the party. In March 1940, assured of Stalin's backing, Wang reprinted the pamphlet in an attempt to make a comeback in the ideological domain by promoting the line of Russianization. To counter Wang's attack, Mao began editing the *Secret Party Documents since the Sixth National Party Congress*, which collected historical documents on the 'Leftist' and 'Rightist' dogmatism of Wang and other pro-Soviet members since 1928. It consisted of 519 articles of about 2.8 million words (i.e. Chinese characters), but contained censorship, interpolation and even falsification to serve Mao's purposes. This is not only political idealism and calculation, but also personal vengeance disguised as a party purge.

[9] Wang (2004) 105.
[10] Wang (2004) 132.
[11] Gao (2018) 117.
[12] Snow (1938) 135.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

Seen in this light, Mao's critique of 'Hellenization-Westernization-Russianization' was the result of prolonged struggles and accumulated grievances, shaped by both the idealism of revolutionary aspirations and political ambitions, as well as personal emotions. Hu Qiaomu, a principal secretary of Mao, described his works during this period as 'wrathful compositions' and 'a huge eruption of his long-term dissatisfaction with the past.'[13]

Through his own ideological lens, Mao urged Chinese intellectuals and party members to reform 'their' studies within the framework of the Sinification of Marxism. By inventing political metaphors to stir debates over the interpretive authority of ideology, Mao strategically sought to reinforce party unity, cultivate a strong sense of national identity and even provoke xenophobic sentiments in response to the dynamics of the power struggle. But he deftly channelled his personal enmity and lust for power into the debate over 'Hellenization-Westernization-Russianization versus Sinification'. Through metaphors, metonyms and proxy expressions, he obscured his true intent to monopolize power in the early stages, eventually shaping this ideological discourse into a political movement that enabled his rise to absolute authority. For this reason, there is a strong consensus among scholars specializing in modern China studies that the Yan'an Rectification Movement established a precedent for later mass movements, where the use of metaphor and stigmatization played a crucial role. They tend to interpret Mao's speech as a prelude to the Rectification, 'constantly commending Hellas', 'tales of ancient Greece and other foreign lands', 'dogmas' and 'gramophones' being neologisms designed to stimulate national identity and collective prejudice against foreign cultures. In other words, the metaphorical expressions served as a trademark strategy of Mao to advance his partisan goals.[14]

In terms of power struggle and ideological interpretation, 'Reform Our Study' was influenced by the 1938 *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*. In the closing remark of the speech, Mao called on all party members to adopt the textbook as the principal material for studying Marxism-Leninism.[15] It was not only a bedrock of Stalinist ideology but also a guide to discipline and orthodoxy that shaped how Mao envisioned political indoctrination within the CCP. There is no evidence that Mao ever developed a keen interest in the Graeco-Roman world that features in the *History* and other Marxian historiographies of pre-capitalist societies, especially as an example of the slave mode of production within the Stalinist division of human history into five stages.[16] Mao seems to have bypassed this intellectual trajectory. An appraisal of *The Struggle for a More Bolshevikized CCP* and the *Secret Party Documents* also reveals no 'Hellenized' or 'philhellenic' material in the party discourse from 1928 to 1941, apart from a brief report on the mass strikes in modern Greece. The same holds true for *A Documentary History of Chinese Communism*, which only mentions Ronald Scobie and the British forces in Greece during the Second World War.[17] Did Mao's metaphor stem from an implicit critique of intellectual dependency on foreign frameworks, or was it a rhetorical device aimed at cementing ideological purity and rejecting indiscriminate borrowing from external traditions? By singling out 'Hellas' and coupling it with dogmatic mimicry, he reframed philhellenism as a symbol of political detachment and theoretical stagnation. This raises the question: aside from political concerns, what intellectual background led Mao to use this expression in parallel with 'tales of ancient Greece and other foreign lands', 'dogmas' and 'gramophones'?

[13] Hu (1994) 192, 214.

[14] In characterizing the expression in question as 'metaphorical', I follow the standard treatment of Gao (2018: 218), who understood 'constantly commending Hellas' as a metaphor parallel to 'gramophones'; that is, Mao euphemistically used 'Hellenization' to refer to those who sought to 'Russify' China.

[15] Mao (1961–1977) 3.24.

[16] That is, primitive communism, the slave mode of production of antiquity, medieval feudalism, modern bourgeois capitalism and socialism. Further on this subject, see de Ste. Croix (1981) 23–28; Lewis (2018) 15–17; Fan (2021) 134–35.

[17] Brandt et al. (1952) 300.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

III. The intellectual context of Chinese philhellenism: from Mencius to Liang Qichao

The phrase 'constantly commending something or someone' can be traced back to classical Chinese literature. As early as the fourth-century BC *Mencius*, it was used to convey the Confucian thinker's nostalgia for legendary sovereigns and idealistic societies. 'Mencius spoke about human nature being good, constantly commending Emperors Yao and Shun.'[18] The *Mencius* is a classic celebrated for its literary eloquence and style, and thanks to the commentary by the inimitable Confucian Zhu Xi, it became a standard textbook in the old-style private schools, where Mao received his early education. Given that Mao visited Mencius' birthplace during his grand tour in the 1920s and frequently referred to the *Mencius* in his writings, we might plausibly assume that the phrase was borrowed from this passage.[19]

But Mao was no slavish imitator. In using 'Hellas' (*Xila*), he showed a preference for a rather modern phonetic rendering, which appeared much later than the *Mencius*. The stylistic hybridity gives the impression of a 'half-literate' expression when one reads 'constantly commending' together with 'Hellas'. Since Mao was born in 1893, we can rule out the possibility that Wu Mi and the Critical Review Group, who made extensive use of Graeco-Roman material in the 1920s and 1930s, had a decisive influence on the political metaphor. Nor did the textbooks on high school-level European history during the Republican Era (1912–1949), since the national curriculum was not issued until 1913, by which time Mao was already an adult, and most of the textbooks dealt with the Graeco-Roman world as a whole.[20] We can trace Mao's preoccupation with ancient Greece to Liang Qichao, a philhellenic figure who towered above his contemporaries and whom Mao often claimed to have admired in his early years. Known for his crucial role in the reform movements and the 'half-literate' journalist style, which was widely adopted in the *Journal of the New Citizen*, Liang interspersed colloquialisms and contemporary issues with classical language to draw a wider audience, and was regarded as a cultural icon by the young Mao. In his interview with Edgar Snow, Mao recalled that in middle school he had read the tales of ancient Greece and considered Liang a model for his own literary practice.[21] In the 1920 treatise *Intellectual Trends in the Qing Period*, Liang described his 'new style' as a liberation from classical Chinese: 'The elders hated it and maliciously described it as something like a wild beast … For the readers, this in itself has a special magical power.'[22] As an imitator, Mao Zedong faced a similar experience, enduring the disdain of his elders:

> I mixed poetry and romances, and the tales of ancient Greece, with serious study of the history and geography of Russia, America, England, France and other countries … A Chinese teacher here, whom the students nicknamed 'Yuan the Big Beard', ridiculed my writing and called it the work of a journalist. He despised Liang Qichao, who had been my model, and considered him half-literate.[23]

Liang published many articles on ancient Greece in the *Journal of the New Citizen*. In the 1902 essay 'Major Trends in the Development of Western Scholarship', he used the pen name 'New Citizen of China' and wrote that Greece was the cultural matrix of modern Europe:

[18] *Mencius*, Book 3A: Bloom and Ivanhoe (2009) 49.

[19] Snow (1938) 136.

[20] On the history textbooks published in Republican China, see Zarrow (2011); Fan (2021) 58–59.

[21] Snow (1938) 120.

[22] This article uses the most recent editions, which have new pagination: Liang (2015) 6828. 'Wild beast' (literally 'wild fox') refers to Liang's unorthodox style of (hand)writing. The translation is based on the stylistic evaluation of Demosthenes, that is, *thērion*, in Aeschin. 3.182.

[23] Snow (1938) 127–29.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

> Greece is the mother of the Europeans. Their politics are inherited from her, their scholarship is inherited from her, their literatures are inherited from her, and their arts and techniques are inherited from her; so also their languages, their customs and all their material and immaterial possessions. It is no exaggeration to say that without Greece there would be no Europe.[24]

In the 1902 essay 'New Historiography', he described Europe as a 'projection' of Greece and Greece as a 'microcosm' of Europe.[25]

Contact between China and the Mediterranean world dates back to the missions of Zhang Qian and Gan Ying to the so-called 'Western Regions'. As early as the reign of Mithridates II in the second century BC, Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty sent envoys to Parthia. Diplomatic exchanges between the two political entities continued during the reign of Pacorus II (*ca.* 78–110). By the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, the influx of Greek works brought by Jesuits for the purposes of evangelization grew significantly. However, it was not until the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898 that philhellenism became a distinctive phenomenon among the governing elites and gentleman scholars. Following the 1885 Chinese adaptation of Charles Fyffe's *History of Greece* (1869) by Joseph Edkins, specialized translations and scholarly introductions to Greek civilization began to spread widely. Renowned Confucian scholar Wang Shunan authored *Notes on Greek Studies* in four books (1901) and *Greek Annals* in eight books (1904). Liang's mentor, Kang Youwei, also attempted Sino-Greek comparisons in the *Journal of Irrepressible Sentiments*, which he founded in 1913.[26] Nevertheless, their influence never surpassed that of Liang. In 1890, while preparing for the imperial examinations in Beijing, Liang discovered a chapter about 'Hellas in Europe' in Xu Jiyu's *Concise Records of the World* (1849).[27] In 1897, when drafting the 'Practical Affairs' section of the 'Hunan Academy Curriculum', he explicitly acknowledged the historical significance of Greece as a source of reflection for China:

> One must thoroughly understand the profound essence of the Six Chinese Classics, verifying their principles with the works of the various schools of thought of the Zhou and Qin dynasties, as well as with Western writings on universal principles and laws, to establish them as the foundation for governance. One must study in depth the historical institutions, developments, successes and failures of past dynasties, supplementing them with ancient Greece and Rome of the West, to use them as the framework for understanding the methods of government employed by the ancients.[28]

In other words, 'whenever discussing an issue or matter, one must compare both ancient and modern times to explore their successes and failures, and further use comparisons to prove the argument.'[29] The idea of 'cherishing the old to acquire the new' was already

[24] Liang (2008) 713. The essay was later republished under the title 'On Ancient Greek Scholarship': Liang (2015) 1098.

[25] Liang (2015) 766–67.

[26] The comparative cases also cover Rome, Egypt, India and Persia: Bartsch (2023) 198 n.55. Additionally, the sixth volume of the journal features 'Greek Travel Notes', and the seventh includes 'Visiting the Ancient Capital of Sparta'.

[27] The section on Greece is part of the sixth book. According to his autobiography, after failing the examination, Liang returned home via Shanghai. There, he purchased the *Concise Records of the World* and for the first time learned about the nations across the five continents. He discovered several translated 'Western' books and developed a keen interest in them: Liang (2015) 990–91.

[28] Liang (2015) 160.

[29] This is a paraphrase of 'The Biography of Master Kang of the Nanhai District': Liang (2015) 522.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

reflected in *The Analects* 2.11. According to Confucian doctrine, one who does so is truly worthy of being a role model. With this approach, Liang adopted Kang Youwei's method and developed another form of 'using the ancient to reform the present government' (*tuogu gaizhi*), drawing on both classical antiquity and Euro-American modernity.[30]

Given the above, 1902 can be considered a landmark for philhellenism in China. In that year, the exiled Liang translated Lord Byron's 'The Isles of Greece' into Chinese for the first time, embedding it in his utopian political novel *The Future of New China*.[31] In the Euro-American context, philhellenism and Hellenomania often took the form of (neo)classicism or support for Greek independence from Ottoman rule.[32] Similarly, Liang's novel is set against the backdrop of the Russian occupation of Port Arthur (modern-day Lyushunkou, China). He had a fictional character recite Byron's poem, using the Greek independence movement as a metaphor for the revival of China, which was then a colonized and declining empire. Liang's effort elevated 'The Isles of Greece' to become the sole Western poem widely embraced at the time. Later, figures like Hu Shi reworked and expanded upon this initial translation, creating a significant cultural phenomenon.[33] Just so, Liang may have influenced Mao on the 'Hellas' theme as he inspired the Greek craze in China. In the *Journal of the New Citizen* that same year, he published 'Short Notes on Athens' and 'Short Notes on Sparta'. In the former essay, Liang described modern Europe as the successor of ancient Greece, characterized the Athenian Empire as the prototype of modern Britain and praised Western civilization as a guide for China. He used the expression 'speaking highly of Hellas' (*zeze dao Xila*), which is fairly close to 'constantly commending Hellas':

> I, the New Historian, believe that all countries, big or small, are equal, and what matters is the extent to which their citizens can benefit from them. Those who speak of non-Chinese history today must speak highly of Hellas, but in terms of its size, Greece proper is not yet eligible to be incorporated into our country as a small province. Those who speak of Greek history must speak highly of Athens and Sparta, but both are not yet eligible to be taken as big counties in China. Since Sparta had fewer than 9,000 full citizens in the time of Lycurgus, and Athens only 16,000 or 17,000 in the time of Cleisthenes, it is even difficult to place them on a par with some large towns in our country. Nevertheless, for thousands of years historians could not but cite them as originators and models in whatever points they made about politics, laws, education, military affairs, economy, scholarship and techniques; for thousands of years historians have tended to view Athens and Sparta as countries of vast land and large population like today's Britain, Russia, Germany and the United States. But few of them have realized that the territory is only as big as a vassal state, and the population is only as large as a military unit. Alas! What kind of statecraft had the ancient Greeks to make this happen?[34]

Liang's knowledge of foreign languages was modest, and many of his articles relied on Chinese and Japanese translations.[35] His work often reflected second-hand interpretations and revealed traces of nationalism and cultural determinism. The collectivist perspective prioritized national independence over individual freedom. This 'classical', if not Athenocentric, view of liberty was common among many in developing countries, where

[30] See also Levenson (1967) 18, 34, 129.

[31] Originally published in the first issue of *New Fiction*, founded by Liang: Liang (2015) 9712–15.

[32] Konstantinou (2012); Harloe and Momigliano (2018); Kotsonis (2025) 250–58.

[33] Chu (1998).

[34] Liang (2008) 2539–40. The essay was reissued in his posthumous anthology in 1936, with the slightly different title 'A Short History of Athens': Liang (2015) 5361.

[35] On these adapted, if not plagiarized, materials, see Chang (1971) 142–48; Fogel (2004). On Japan's reception of ancient Greece, see Taida (2018); Lucken (2019), especially chapter 2.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

individual freedoms were subordinated to the pursuit of national sovereignty.[36] Even today, for many in China, the Olympic Games remain a tool for the rejuvenation of a postcolonial nation-state through international sports.[37] The concept of cultural determinism, too, is so pervasive that many societies have attributed their political and economic systems to their unique ideas and customs. In the context of classical reception in China, it suggests a connection between classical antiquity and 'Western' modernity, whether viewed positively (the Renaissance and the Enlightenment) or negatively (the Platonic *sōphronistērion* and the Holocaust). In other words, the Greek classics are important for Europeans and Americans as significant formative elements in their past. The overarching aim is to demonstrate how 'Western' civilization has evolved as a continuous entity, rather than being fragmented by historical disruptions.[38] But Liang pioneered a novel approach: understanding the 'other' to enrich the 'self' and leveraging the past to illuminate the present. Stylistically, the expression 'speaking highly of Hellas' bears no resemblance to the *Mencius*, but they share a core value in using the past to address the needs of the present. The key difference lies in their focus: while Mencius and later generations of Confucians were fixated on the local, Chinese past, Liang broadened his perspective to encompass foreign, Western history. By adopting the idea of classical antiquity as the foundation of Euro-American modernity, he used ancient Greece as a resource in his attempts to transform the Chinese people from 'subjects of the emperor' into 'citizens of a nation', thereby ushering in the rise of philhellenism.

Liang's fascination with Greece never progressed to rigorous theoretical inquiry or practical political application, and *The Future of New China* remained an unfinished draft. In an era where revolution overshadowed enlightenment, Mao soon abandoned his early fascination with this youthful idol, whom he had once considered the best candidate for China's foreign minister.[39] Later, in 1958, in a meeting with subordinates Mao delivered his final verdict, saying that Liang's life was 'something of an anticlimax'.[40] The expression he used translates literally as 'a tiger's head with a snake's tail' and he also used it to caution against giving up in party affairs such as struggles against corruption. Paired with the phrase 'lost his unswerving determination to reform', it suggests that in Mao's view, despite styling himself a 'New Citizen' and 'New Historian', Liang fell short and was not as revolutionary as he should have been. In a letter home in 1927, Liang Qichao even voiced scepticism about the CCP, predicting that communist China would succumb to dictatorship and totalitarianism.[41]

IV. Metamorphosis of classical reception after the communist conquest

It seems likely that, well before the Yan'an Rectification Movement, Mao had become wary of Liang's humanist perspective on Greek and Western culture, which radically contradicted his own communist and nationalist ideals. Beyond these distant concerns, there were more immediate factors that led Mao to invoke 'Greek' themes in the party purge. While China never experienced a philhellenic movement on the scale of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, nor produce Byron-like heroes, many figures can still be classified as what we might now call philhellenists. Luo Niansheng, a distinguished

[36] Chang (1971) 201–03; Bartsch (2023) 33–36.

[37] Guo (2024) 274.

[38] On this subject, see Vlassopoulos (2010); Murray (2024) 12, 215–17, 371.

[39] Snow (1938) 123. In fact, Liang had served as both chief justice and minister of finance during the Republican Era.

[40] Wu (1995) 163.

[41] Ding and Zhao (1983) 1127–28. Thus Liang's idea of citizenship, in either its ancient or modern guise, had little impact on Mao's political thinking: *cf.* Lee (2007); Bartsch (2023) 32–36.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

translator of the Greek classics, made the following observations in 1934, the same year that Fustel de Coulanges' *La cité antique* was translated into Chinese:

> In recent years, there has been a thriving atmosphere of classical studies in our country. This is something to rejoice in. As far as the theoretical approaches are concerned, it has already been put forward by gentlemen such as Wu Mi and Liang Shiqiu. For the classical texts, there are Gao Ge's prose translations of epic poetry and Fu Donghua's rhyming translations. For drama and romance, we have Zhou Zuoren's Chinese adaptations of Theocritus' *Idylls* and Herodas' *Mimes*, translated directly from the original text. Platonic dialogues have also been translated directly from the Greek by Guo Binhe. Short discussions and introductions are common, and Mao Dun's 'The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*' is one of the most impressive.[42]

Mao Dun, among others, served as a liaison for the CCP. It is not surprising that this intellectual trend spread to Yan'an, the holy land of the Chinese Communist Revolution from the 1930s onwards, with Xiao Jun as one of its exponents. There is no evidence that Mao's reflection on philhellenism was specifically directed at Xiao, who, unlike the towering figure Liang, was just a soldier in the Hellenized hoplite phalanx. However, since Xiao was a regular guest of Mao before the Rectification, his personal views may well have come to Mao's attention; and indeed the presence of such a philhellenist makes Mao's mishellenism more easily intelligible. Xiao arrived in Yan'an in 1940 and openly criticized the corrupt practices and privileges within the party. He not only labelled Wang a petty-bourgeois official but also envisioned reshaping Mao's revolutionary ideology. He asserted, 'to shoot a man, shoot his horse; to capture the foe, capture their chief. Thus, I must first change Mao before I can change the vulgar tendencies of all party members.'[43] This expression is drawn from Du Fu's classical poem and attests to Xiao's romantic imagination. Among his reading materials were Zhou Zuoren's annotated translations of Greek literature and the 1930 translation of Lynn Thorndike's *A Short History of Civilization*.[44] Here are three notable passages from his *Yan'an Diary*:

> European countries developed following the spirit of ancient Greece. France belongs to the Athenian tradition, Germany belongs to the Spartan tradition, and the Soviet Union was the prototype of a new Greece …
>
> The spirit of the Greek age: well-being, beauty, sociability, freedom, independence …
>
> Ideologically, I shall move beyond Marxism towards an individualized neo-Greek thought. The spiritual and emotional history of human beings should be improved gradually for the perfection of individuals.[45]

As a novelist and poet, Xiao evokes a value-laden, Winckelmannian vision of Greece. While he promoted heroism and individualism, the CCP insisted on enforcing collectivism and ideological conformity. Although short-term cooperation between them was possible, friction and confrontation were inevitable over time due to ideological incompatibility. Xiao's philhellenism can be seen as inheriting the tradition of Liang, both men viewing

[42] Luo (2016) 9.265. Luo Niansheng was trained as a classicist in the United States and was probably one of Dover's 'four old men who could read Greek': *cf.* Yue (2025). Here 'impressive' carries a rather ironic connotation, as Mao Dun's work on the Homeric epics was known to contain factual errors.

[43] Xiao (2013) 1.79, 360.

[44] Xiao (2013) 1.393; (2014) 287, 304–05, 308, 318, 344.

[45] Xiao (2013) 1.114, 374; (2014) 236.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

ancient Greece as the cradle of Western civilization and a mirror for China's modernization. On 2 May 1942, Mao delivered a speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in which he emphasized that literature and art should serve politics while minimizing the roles of criticism and satire. This speech brought the party purge to its logical conclusion and became the cornerstone for policies relating to revolutionary and mass culture after the communist conquest. Undeterred by the leader's authority, Xiao was the first to speak after Mao. He gave a 40-minute response that he later published as 'My Views on Current Issues in Literature and Art'.[46] This moment signified a renewed confrontation between 'Westernization-Hellenization' and 'Sinification'. As a non-party outsider, Xiao sought to intercede on behalf of the victims in the Rectification. The humanistic tone, fascination with ancient Greece and advocacy of liberalism exacerbated the tensions in the conflicting ideas about philhellenism and mishellenism. Xiao was soon suppressed, later subjected to harsh punitive treatment in subsequent mass movements and was rehabilitated only after Mao's death. In December 1943, he voluntarily exiled himself to a small village. Although he returned to Yan'an shortly afterwards, Xiao vehemently criticized the Rectification in his diary, which to some extent validates Liang's prediction.[47] Therefore, we should distinguish Mao's critique of philhellenism from scholarly reflections on the limits of 'Hellenization'.[48] His mishellenism was not a position reached from academic discussion but a response to pressing political realities. While Liang and Xiao embodied an idealized view of Greece, the metaphor of 'constantly commending Hellas' signified the shift in this interpretive paradigm towards political discourse and ideology. Mao's attack on the philhellenists marked the first wave of mishellenism in China. This, alongside works like 'Reform Our Study' and the speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, paved the way for the rise of a totalitarian party state. It also heralded a new ideological era and continues to influence China's educational frameworks and cultural outreach to this day.

A 'half-literate' expression, Mao's metaphor can be seen as a product of the Transitional Period of modern Chinese intellectual history. According to Chang Hao's definition, this period begins in the 1890s, in particular with the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, and is characterized by the rise of political parties, learned societies, the elite press and the intelligentsia. It ends with the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925, a significant labour and anti-imperialist movement that marked the transition into the Ideological Period.[49] During the Transitional Period, governing elites and gentleman scholars not only began to abandon their old world-views and archaic writing style, but also championed the idea of wholesale or partial 'Westernization' through learning from Europeans, Americans and their Greek 'ancestors'. By the time Mao conquered China in the Ideological Period, communism, nationalism and utopianism had replaced the 'universal' values that had prevailed in much of the West since the Renaissance and Enlightenment, giving rise to mishellenism. Because Mao straddled both periods, his metaphor became a term familiar to the bureaucratic system, intellectuals and even the general populace.

The cultic worship of Mao as supreme leader has endured since it flourished in 1949, and his many political writings have become compulsory reading at various stages of education. For example, the so-called 'Three Old Articles' were studied by everyone during the Cultural Revolution, and many can recite the complete texts even today.[50] 'Reform Our Study' has also occupied a cardinal position, featuring in the school curriculum for more than half a century. As it has long been included in secondary school textbooks, the

[46] See also Hsia (1968) 253–54.
[47] Xiao (2013) 2.657.
[48] See, for example, Momigliano (1971).
[49] Chang (1971) 96, 107, 296–97, 301; (1987) 1–2, 189.
[50] Li (1995) 225–27.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

expression 'constantly commending Hellas' has become a catchphrase in the Sinosphere. A search in the massive Chinese research database CNKI yields over 5,000 results.[51] The teaching of the Chinese language in China's secondary schools has undergone many changes since the CCP came to power, but the focus on integrating ideological and political education into teaching activities has remained consistent. A 1959 teaching plan shows that 'Reform Our Study' was placed at the top of the list of Chinese lessons for high school seniors. This textbook emphasized Sinification and communist ideologies and placed Mao's work alongside Chinese literature and translated passages of Soviet literature.[52] A textbook from 2020 for students in the same grade also included Mao's speech. The editors added a footnote to 'constantly commending Hellas', explaining it as dogmatic application of 'foreign principles' while acknowledging the Greek influence on European culture.[53] More intriguingly, in the same unit of this textbook, 'Reform Our Study' was paired with a translated passage from Plato's *Crito* exploring the concept of justice. Is this a mere coincidence, a revival of Liang's philhellenism or an ironic manoeuvre on the part of the editors?

It would be valuable here to discuss further how the other sources intersected with, and played into, Mao's portrayal of phil-/mishellenism. Noteworthy is the stigmatization of Zhou Yang by Yao Wenyuan, a member of the Gang of Four. It is reported that some liberalist critics, such as Hu Feng, borrowed Mao's metaphor and coined phrases like 'constantly commending Maoism' to express their concern about the CCP's oppression of free speech. As Hu Feng had already been imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, Zhou Yang was accused of being a backstage manipulator. It would admittedly be quibbling to complain that Zhou Yang showed a preference for Russified literary criticism. As one of most important literary theorists, Zhou Yang was once referred to as a 'good person' by Mao.[54] As early as the Yan'an period, he emerged as the arch-rival of Xiao and other liberalist critics. However, in Yao Wenyuan's accusation, this was cast aside in such a way that 'constantly commending Hellas' became a struggle slogan used to discredit political opponents, whether they were philhellenists or not:

> Zhou Yang tried his best to echo Hu Feng's counter-revolutionary remarks to get him rehabilitated, and this completely exposed that he and Hu Feng had the same position. Zhou Yang said: 'Hu Feng said that Vulgar Mechanistic Materialism has ruled Chinese literary circles for twenty years … If we do not do well and do not carry out the policy of letting a hundred flowers bloom and letting a hundred schools of thought contend, there will be certain hard-headed cardinals, nuns and monks constantly commending Marxism-Leninism and constantly commending Mao Zedong Thought, and this fact alone is quite vexing. I have always remembered these two remarks by Hu Feng' (16 June 1961). What vicious insinuations! Hu Feng organized a diabolical counter-revolutionary group, but Zhou Yang 'always remembered' his words like his ancestral family precepts, all because he admired Hu Feng's deep-seated hatred of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. 'Constantly commending Mao Zedong Thought' must be a counter-attack, since in 'Reform Our Study' Comrade Mao Zedong criticized Wang Ming's faction as 'constantly commending Hellas'. Zhou Yang was one of them and had always held grudges: now he broke out into curses. You are annoyed that there are people 'constantly commending Mao Zedong Thought' because you are a bourgeois and a comprador of

[51] The expression is rarely attested in Taiwan (Republic of China) and Hong Kong (colony of the British Empire until 1997), both of which use traditional Chinese rather than simplified Chinese.

[52] Beijing Chinese Language Teaching Research Association (1999) 219.

[53] Cheng and Wang (2020) 8 n.1.

[54] Xiao (2013) 1.341.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

> foreigners. You are fond of 'constantly commending foreigners' and 'constantly commending Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Dubropov', because this gives you a feeling of comfort.[55]

This long essay, 'A Commentary on Zhou Yang, Double-Dealer and Counter-Revolutionary', was first published in 1967 in the *Red Flag*, one of the CCP's official journals, and then spread as a political pamphlet in China and within leftist circles in Hong Kong. As a result, during the Cultural Revolution, 'constantly commending Hellas' became a way of describing people as worthy of disgrace in party discourse and 'orthodox' historiography, much as anti-Stalinists could easily be labelled 'Trotskyists', regardless of whether they actually were. By this point, the expression had been thoroughly politicized, disregarding the facts to smear political opponents, whether or not they sought to 'Hellenize' China.

Yet the philhellenists proved themselves resilient in confronting challenges. Thanks to his reading of George Grote's *A History of Greece*, Gu Zhun perpetuated Liang's philhellenism by juxtaposing ancient Greece with modern Britain: he privileged pluralism over monism and favoured Anglo-American empiricism over the continental rationalism which ultimately gave birth to Marxism. These intellectual inclinations made him a pioneer of Chinese liberalism and market economy. He was a financial official and senior cadre of the CCP. Due to persecution during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution, he spent his later years in prison and re-education centres, yet this did not prevent him from becoming a pioneering thinker. It can be said that Gu, through his personal efforts, transformed phil-/mishellenism from a metaphor for factional struggles into a pursuit of intellectual autonomy. Ancient Greece served as a window to the West during this tumultuous period. According to the recollections of his younger brother, Gu encouraged him to explore works on 'Western' civilization:

> It is not difficult for readers to notice that discussions of Western history, especially Greek history and civilization, make up nearly half of his collected works. In the winter of 1972, during a meeting with Gu Zhun, after I told him that I wanted to read some history books, he suggested that I start by reading some Western history. In our correspondence, he told me more than once that it was difficult to truly understand Marxism if one did not understand Western history. Since Marxism has its roots in Western civilization, it cannot be separated from the history and tradition of the West. He once complained that because some translators of *Das Kapital* did not understand Western history, their translations were not free from inaccuracies, and he even translated some passages himself. Likewise, it is impossible for Westerners to understand Chinese civilization if they do not understand Chinese history, Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Mozi, Xunzi, Hanfeizi, etc. Someone harshly criticized people who constantly commend Hellas and Rome. Of course, his intention is to criticize them for their preoccupation with non-Chinese history and dogmatism. It is indeed miserable for a Chinese person to know little about Chinese history. But if the Chinese people, especially the Marxists, do not know Western history and do not understand the Western history and tradition that gave birth to Marxism, along with its original meaning and spiritual essence, they can hardly apply Marxism properly to China's actual situation. Unfortunately, so far people seem to have ignored this simple truth and are content to read only quotations from the Little Red Book, remaining obsessed with the outdated view that 'it is possible to rule the world with only half of the sayings of Confucius.'[56]

[55] Yao (1971) 120.

[56] Chen (2003) 149–50. Lin Zhao also wrote the long poem *A Day in Prometheus' Passion*, but as a Christian, she used the Greek reference to express her faith: Johnson (2023) 74.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

There is good reason to believe that this passage contains direct quotations from Gu. We can see how his words both partook of Mao's mishellenism and departed from the political metaphor. They aptly encapsulate a liberalist notion that, when Maoism itself became dogmatic, philhellenism could serve as an antidote. By alluding to Mao as 'someone', Gu found an ingenious way, what we now call self-censorship, to circumvent the communist regime and state control. Mao and Gu represent two distinct strands of the same intellectual current: while Mao stirred up disputes and antagonisms between 'Hellenization' and 'Sinification', Gu sought to reconcile them in an attempt to transform the minds of modern China through the 'Westernized' process of modernization and enlightenment. Gu reversed the mishellenist trend and facilitated the revival of philhellenism represented by Liang and Xiao. Since most of the discussions were preserved in private notes, diaries, conversations and correspondence, the publication of Gu's posthumous works became an intellectual event. By transforming 'constantly commending Hellas' from a metaphor for factional power struggles into dissident expression, Gu should be regarded as the one of the most influential philhellenists in China.

V. Evolving trends in the post-Mao era

Chinese scholars only began to acknowledge the under-developed state of their teaching and research following the 'Reform and Opening Up' policy in the 1980s. This realization led to the establishment of 'Ancient World History Studies', a field dedicated to the study of ancient history in non-Chinese regions. Lin Zhichun created this discipline almost single-handedly, in particular through founding the Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations at Northeast Normal University in 1984, which has since trained a sizeable number of graduate students and researchers in classical studies in China.[57] Recent scholarship has revisited his role in the debate over the Marxian theory of the Asiatic Mode of Production and questioned whether he was (even half-heartedly) a 'red professor' collaborating with the state. However, a closer examination of his diaries, correspondence and reading notes reveals a more nuanced and multifaceted perspective on authoritarian regimes held by this centenarian.[58] For instance, his private copy of Karl Marx's 'Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction' reveals critical reflections on state control over free speech, where he underlined in red ink the passage 'an authority which regulates, even more than the Roman censors did, not only the behaviour of individual citizens, but even the behaviour of the public mind'.[59]

Compared to Xiao and Gu, Lin's resistance strategy was moderate. On the one hand, he openly criticized the rigid application of Marxism-Leninism in Chinese academia, mocking the excessive veneration of Marxism as 'constantly commending Marx and Lenin'. On the other hand, he avoided referencing Mao's metaphor, opting instead for a tacit approach that conveyed subtle dissent without overt commentary.[60] Lin was also a pioneering scholar in comparative studies. He used historical parallels to draw lessons for China's development as a 'modern' civilization. He argued that Early China possessed a political structure similar to the Greek *poleis* and sought to position Chinese and Greek civilizations along a shared historical trajectory. Drawing inspiration from Liang's essay 'On the

[57] Lin also founded the peer-reviewed *Journal of Ancient Civilizations* as a platform for international scholarly exchange. Peter Rhodes initially observed that it was 'rather inaccessible', but later became a contributor himself: Rhodes and Osborne (2003) 531; Rhodes (2019). See also Li (2020); Mutschler (2023).

[58] Fan (2021) 12, 14.

[59] Marx and Engels (1975–2004) 1.110. See also Lin's private collection of the first volume of the Chinese translation (1956): Northeast Normal University, Archive Y–082/020, p. 4.

[60] Lin (2012) 1.237, 4.378.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

Similarities and Differences between Chinese and European Political Systems', Lin compared the Chinese concept of the 'statesman' in pre-Qin texts with full citizenry of Athens. While Liang observed that in the Zhou dynasty, 'its people were also of one body with the state', Lin aimed to demonstrate that there were moments in Chinese history when democracy was emerging.[61] As early as the 1930s, Ichisada Miyazaki had associated the *poleis* of ancient Greece with early Chinese 'city-states' based on archaeological evidence such as city walls.[62] Lin went a step further to give valuable insights into the potential of China's political past. There is no evidence that he had access to Japanese scholarship; his comparative analysis was shaped directly by Liang. In this respect, Lin did not transcend the frameworks of nationalism and cultural determinism, but his efforts to place Chinese and Greek civilizations on equal terms broadened the philhellenist perspective.[63] Building on the idea of using the past to serve the present, Lin laid the groundwork for exploring the political practices of city-states within a Chinese context, ancient and modern alike. Like Gu, his scholarship illustrates how philhellenism, especially the study of Athenian democracy, could empower the Chinese nation to achieve intellectual autonomy.

After Lin, academic rigour became a crucial criterion in evaluating Chinese 'Hellenomania'. While this shift narrowed the field and reduced its capacity to engage with broader public discourse, it also limited the appeal of the nationalist interpretive paradigm of the 'Straussian school', which is seldom congenial to classicists. Lin and the leading figures of this school represent two contrasting paradigms; that is, normalization versus naturalization. The latter approach integrates Confucian statecraft with Platonic and Aristotelian meritocracy, treating Greek texts not so much as objects of critical inquiry as repositories of political prescriptions to be naturalized within a Chinese framework. Yet this school remains an active and evolving movement rather than a closed historical episode. Its future is uncertain, since it may grow or decline, as the closure of the Leo Strauss Center suggests.[64] Nonetheless, the tension between 'Westernization-Hellenization' and 'Sinification' persists in the post-Mao era. The cumulative effects of mishellenism have even led nationalist and pro-government scholars to maliciously dismiss Graeco-Roman antiquity as a Renaissance fabrication.[65] 'Hellenomania' becomes a double-edged sword: while researchers and general readers usually discuss concepts like the 'Thucydides Trap', the ruling authorities continue to wield this political metaphor to challenge 'Western' values, as well as 'Eurocentric' and 'pro-American' intellectuals.[66] On 29 May 2022, the social media of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, the highest internal control institution of the CCP, used this metaphor to downplay the tendency in the school textbooks to take over 'Western' values wholesale:

[61] Liang (2015) 344; Lin (2012) 4.208–09, 229. Regarding Confucian thought on human rights and citizenship, it can be argued that in Early China, *ren* ('men') may refer to ruling individuals akin to 'citizens', whereas *min* ('people') typically denotes commoners or those of lower social standing, just as *anēr* and *anthrōpos* are distinguished in Attic prose: Guo (2025) 226.

[62] Sato (2003) 89 n.49.

[63] See also Fan (2018) 211.

[64] For this reason, revealing too much of its internal workings risks turning scholarly analysis into sensational reportage, even though we now have the groundbreaking study by Bartsch (2023).

[65] Bartsch (2023) 67–68. Of course, we should not afford undue attention to these self-serving wordsmiths who, under the guise of academic discourse, deploy sophistry to obfuscate genuine debate.

[66] The 'Thucydides Trap' predicts a potential military conflict between the United States and Communist China like the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta: Thuc. 1.23.6. The 'Tacitus Trap', which refers to the everlasting hatred of a government that loses credibility, can be seen as its 'Romanized' counterpart: Tac. *Hist*. 1.7. See also Bartsch (2023) 181, 232 n.5; Günther (2023).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

> Chinese textbooks must be rooted in Chinese soil, stand firm in China and show the Sinified style; they must not always deal with material that is Eurocentric and pro-American, and they must avoid the tendency of 'constantly commending Hellas'.[6]

This does make a point of giving Chinese culture its due on the one hand, and on the other stands in stark contrast to the 2020 textbook, which placed Mao on an equal footing with Plato.

In fact, while in the ideological domain 'constantly commending Hellas' conveys a negative notion of 'Western-slanted' pedantry, in academic discourse it is typically used in a positive sense to describe someone who is 'open-minded' and 'enlightened'. Even more paradoxically, the CCP may find itself embarrassed by the numerous references to the Greek world in the works of Marx and Engels, which form the theoretical foundation of the party. In the 1883 *Dialectics of Nature*, for example, Engels argued that modern Europe was something like a revival of ancient Greece:

> With the rise of Constantinople and the fall of Rome, antiquity comes to an end. The end of the Middle Ages is indissolubly linked with the fall of Constantinople. The new age begins with the return to the Greeks. Negation of the negation![68]

If the Marxian new age signifies a (re)turn to ancient Greece, then Chinese-style modernization and socialism will be deprived of their theoretical legitimacy. The inaugural World Conference of Classics, held in Beijing in November 2024, alongside the establishment of the Chinese School at Athens, exemplifies notable initiatives. The government has invested considerable resources into these projects with the aim of enhancing China's cultural soft power and expanding its geopolitical influence. However, because ancient Greece frequently engages with 'sensitive' topics such as democracy and freedom, the government has shown a degree of reluctance to fully embrace these efforts, revealing a nuanced and somewhat ambivalent stance.[69] The dialectical theory of development can be applied to 'Hellenomania' in China, as the oscillation between philhellenism and mishellenism reflects the pattern of 'negation of the negation'. Not only Mao, but also his predecessors, contemporaries and successors have demonstrated the extent to which classical antiquity can be (ab)used in political discourse. 'Hellenomania' in China is like a contemporary sculptor's Discobolus in a Mao suit. It can serve simultaneously as both enlightenment and counter-enlightenment, politicization and depoliticization. As the late Ian Jenkins said, the sculpture offers us 'a metaphor for the intellectual and artistic constraint of communist-era China'.[70]

In the absence of great Latinists like Theodor Mommsen, Chinese thinkers have often assigned the Romans a secondary role within the narrative of classical antiquity.[71] The depoliticization under totalitarian rule has refined philhellenism as a compensatory response to their curtailed political agency. In terms of intellectual autonomy, this has fostered a new discourse on the interplay between Chinese and Western cultures, particularly through an intensified focus on Athenian democracy. The Chinese path to

[67] https://www.ccdi.gov.cn/toutiaon/202205/t20220529_195637.html (in Chinese).

[68] Marx and Engels (1975–2004) 25.472. For a Greek poem written by the 16-year-old Engels, which narrates the story of Eteocles and Polynices in Homeric hexameter, see Baldwin (1989).

[69] For reflections, see Whitmarsh (2025).

[70] Jenkins (2012) 57.

[71] On Mommsen and the rise of Roman studies, see Demandt (1990) 285. In contrast to Athenian democracy, Rome's imperial structure and autocratic ruler bore similarities to China in many respects, and thus did not arouse significant interest among Chinese observers at the time. In more recent scholarship, the comparison between the Han dynasty and the Roman Empire, especially concerning the parallel trajectories of imperial rise and decline, has attracted attention: Huang (2019) 372; Loewe (2025).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

modernization has failed to resolve the question of political subjectivity. That is the reason for the swing of the pendulum. Therefore, no other subject is as prevalent or as widely discussed as 'Hellenomania', nor did Mao ever criticize anyone for 'constantly commending Rome'. To sum up, classical reception in modern China can be divided into five stages that oscillate between philhellenism and mishellenism. Its development corresponds to China's evolution from a nation-state in the past to a party state in the present, and potentially to a city-state in the future, one that is 'modern' and integrated into the global mainstream. The following summary seeks not so much to establish a rigid chronological framework as to illuminate both the continuities and the ruptures across the Late Qing period (*ca*. 1840–1912), the Republican Era (1912–1949) and the People's Republic of China (1949–). Accordingly, although Liang and Xiao belonged to different generations, their philhellenism took shape in a public sphere marked by greater latitude for expression before the 1949 communist conquest. Likewise, Gu's solitary reflections had little influence during the Cultural Revolution, yet would come to be recognized shortly after being rediscovered in the post-Mao era.

(i) After the Opium Wars in the mid-19th century, the world-views of the governing elites and gentleman scholars underwent significant changes. China came to be seen as a declining civilization in a new global order, and its 'modernization' was envisioned as a process of imitating Western civilization that could be traced back to classical antiquity. Early philhellenists such as Liang and Xiao are representative figures of this Transitional Period, when China was transformed from a hereditary monarchical regime into a nation-state.

(ii) Although ancient Greece held a position of honour, controversies arose over the tension between 'Hellenization-Westernization' and 'Sinification'. In the party purge of 1941, Mao invented the political metaphor of 'constantly commending Hellas' and characterized the pro-Soviet faction as 'philhellenic' and 'Westernized', launching not only an attack against party rivals but also the first wave of mishellenism.

(iii) After the communist conquest in 1949, 'constantly commending Hellas' became a buzzword in the power struggle. Especially during the Cultural Revolution, the Gang of Four used it to stigmatize those who were allegedly Western-leaning and anti-Mao. This second wave of mishellenism was framed within the context of total Sinification and provoked confrontation.

(iv) In unofficial discourse, the positive use of the metaphor can be traced back to Gu, who studied Grote's *A History of Greece* during the Cultural Revolution. By styling himself as a philhellenist, Gu revived the tradition of juxtaposing classical antiquity with modernity, paving the way for the renaissance of philhellenism in the post-Mao era.

(v) In the post-Mao era, Lin played a crucial role in establishing 'Ancient World History Studies' as a professional discipline. By proposing the existence of Greek-style *poleis* in Early China, he placed Chinese antiquity on an equal footing with classical Graeco-Roman antiquity. This offered a pathway to breaking free from conventional frameworks of philhellenism and mishellenism, signalling a shift towards more academic and balanced perspectives.

In conclusion, philhellenism and mishellenism are held together in a precarious equilibrium in China. The conflicting tensions between them persist to this day, and the dynamic adds an important perspective to the study of the cultural interactions and confrontations between East and West, both historically and in contemporary contexts.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

The (ab)use of 'Hellenomania' constitutes a topic worthy of continued exploration. In this spirit, the present article aims to carry its legacy into the future, in dialogue with public discourse, academic circles and everywhere in between.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to the Editors of *JHS*, the two anonymous readers and to Carol Atack, Mirko Canevaro, Thomas Jansen, Zhi Li, Lijuan Lin, Lily Mac Mahon, György Németh, Manolis Pagkalos, Xueliang Shi, Xiaoxu Xu, Qiang Zhang and Xuqiang Zhang for their feedback and suggestions. All interpretations and claims in this article are entirely my own responsibility.

Bibliography

Baldwin, B. (1989) 'A Greek poem by Friedrich Engels', *QUCC* 33.3, 51–63
Bartsch, S. (2023) *Plato Goes to China: The Greek Classics and Chinese Nationalism* (Princeton)
Beijing Chinese Language Teaching Research Association (1999) *Beijing shi zhongxiaoxue yuwen jiaoyu wushi nian* [*50 Years of Chinese Language Education in Beijing's Primary and Secondary Schools*] (Beijing)
Bloom, I.T. and Ivanhoe, P.J. (2009) *Mencius* (Translations from the Asian Classics) (New York)
Brandt, C., Schwartz, B.I. and Fairbank, J.K. (1952) *A Documentary History of Chinese Communism* (Cambridge MA)
CCP Central Documents Research Office (2013) *Mao Zedong nianpu (1949–1976)* [*Chronology of Mao Zedong (1949–1976)*] (6 vols) (Beijing)
Chang, H. (1971) *Liang Ch'i-ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China, 1890–1907* (Cambridge MA)
— (1987) *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning, 1890–1911* (Taipei)
Chen, M. (2003) *Wo yu Gu Zhun* [*Gu Zhun and Me*] (Shanghai)
Cheng, Z. and Wang, B. (2020) *Putong gaozhong jiaokeshu: yuwen, zhong ce* [*Senior High School Textbook: Chinese Language 2*] (Beijing)
Chu, C.Y. (1998) 'Lord Byron's "The Isles of Greece": first translations', in D.E. Pollard (ed.), *Translation and Creation: Readings of Western Literature in Early Modern China, 1840–1918* (Amsterdam) 79–104
Demandt, A. (1990) 'Theodor Mommsen', in W.W. Briggs and W.M. Calder III (eds), *Classical Scholarship: A Biographical Encyclopedia* (New York and London) 285–309
de Ste. Croix, G.E.M. (1981) *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (London)
Ding, W. and Zhao, F. (1983) *Liang Qichao nianpu changbian* [*A Long Chronicle of Liang Qichao*] (Shanghai)
Dover, K.J., Halliwell, S. and Stray, C.A. (2023) *Marginal Comment: A Memoir Revisited* (London)
Fan, X. (2018) 'Imagining classical antiquity in twentieth-century China', in A.-B. Renger and X. Fan (eds), *Receptions of Greek and Roman Antiquity in East Asia* (Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity 13) (Leiden and Boston) 202–18
— (2021) *World History and National Identity in China: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge)
Fogel, J.A. (2004) 'Introduction: Liang Qichao and Japan', in J.A. Fogel (ed.), *The Role of Japan in Liang Qichao's Introduction of Modern Western Civilization to China* (China Research Monograph 57) (Berkeley) 1–12
Gao, H. (2018) *How the Red Sun Rose: The Origins and Development of the Yan'an Rectification Movement, 1930–1945* (tr. S. Mosher and J. Guo) (Hong Kong)
Günther, S. (2023) 'Tacitus trap', in V.E. Pagán (ed.), *The Tacitus Encyclopedia* (Hoboken and Chichester) 1061–63
Guo, Z. (2024) 'Framing the Delphic oracle, institutionalizing the Olympic Games: Phlegon of Tralles' *Olympiads*', *CQ* 74.1, 269–80
— (2025) *Commentary on the Pseudonymous Letters of Aeschines* (Tübingen)
Harloe, K. and Momigliano, N. (2018) 'Hellenomania: ancient and modern obsessions with the Greek past', in K. Harloe, N. Momigliano and A. Farnoux (eds), *Hellenomania* (British School at Athens, Modern Greek and Byzantine Studies 5) (London and New York) 1–19
Hsia, T.A. (1968) *The Gate of Darkness: Studies on the Leftist Literary Movement in China* (Far Eastern and Russian Institute Publications on Asia 17) (Seattle and London)
Hu, Q. (1994) *Hu Qiaomu huiyi Mao Zedong* [*Hu Qiaomu Remembers Mao Zedong*] (Beijing)
Huang, Y. (2019) 'Classical studies in China', in A.-B. Renger and X. Fan (eds), *Receptions of Greek and Roman Antiquity in East Asia* (Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity 13) (Leiden and Boston) 363–75
Jenkins, I. (2012) *The Discobolus* (London)
Johnson, I. (2023) *Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future* (Oxford)
Konstantinou, E. (2012) 'Graecomania and philhellenism' (tr. N. Williams), *European History Online* https://www.ieg-ego.eu/konstantinoue-2012-en

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

Kotsonis, Y. (2025) *The Greek Revolution and the Violent Birth of Nationalism* (Princeton)
Lee, T.M.L. (2007) 'Liang Qichao and the meaning of citizenship: then and now', *History of Political Thought* 28.2, 305–27
Levenson, J.R. (1967) *Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China* (2nd edition) (Berkeley)
Lewis, D.M. (2018) *Greek Slave Systems in Their Eastern Mediterranean Context, c. 800–146 BC* (Oxford)
Li, K. (1995) *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People's Republic of China* (tr. M. Lok) (Hong Kong)
Li, X. (2020) 'Egyptology in China', in I. Shaw and E. Bloxam (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Egyptology* (Oxford) 65–78
Liang, Q. (2008) *Xinmin congbao* [*Journal of the New Citizen*] (Beijing)
— (2015) *Yinbingshi heji* [*Collected Works from the Ice Drinker's Studio*] (2nd edition) (Beijing)
Lin, Z. (2012) *Rizhi wenji* [*Collected Works of Rizhi*] (4 vols) (Beijing)
Loewe, M. (2025) *Imperial Institutions in Ancient Rome and Early China: A Comparative Analysis* (ed. M. Nylan and T. Corey Brennan) (London)
Lucken, M. (2019) *Le Japon grec. Culture et possession* (Bibliothèque des histoires) (Paris)
Luo, N. (2016) *Luo Niansheng quanji* [*The Complete Works of Luo Niansheng*] (10 vols) (Shanghai)
Mao, T. (1961–1977) *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (5 vols) (Beijing)
Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1975–2004) *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works* (50 vols) (London)
Momigliano, A. (1971) *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge)
Murray, O. (2024) *The Muse of History: The Ancient Greeks from the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA)
Mutschler, F.-H. (2023) Review of Bartsch, *Plato Goes to China: The Greek Classics and Chinese Nationalism*, *BMCR* 2023-11-41 https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2023/2023.11.41
Porteous, B. (2024) '"The words of a nation worn down by cares": classical wisdom and modern crisis in Lin Shu's *Aesop's Fables*', *Classical Receptions Journal* 16.2, 143–61
Rhodes, P.J. (2019) 'The Athenian assembly and council: continuing problems', *JAC* 34.1, 39–67
Rhodes, P.J. and Osborne, R.G. (2003) *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 404–323 BC* (Oxford and New York)
Sato, M. (2003) *The Confucian Quest for Order: The Origin and Formation of the Political Thought of Xun Zi* (Sinica Leidensia 58) (Leiden and Boston)
Snow, E. (1938) *Red Star over China* (New York)
Taida, I. (2018) 'History and reception of Greek and Latin studies in Japan', in A.-B. Renger and X. Fan (eds), *Receptions of Greek and Roman Antiquity in East Asia* (Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity 13) (Leiden and Boston) 73–87
Vlassopoulos, K. (2010) 'Constructing antiquity and modernity in the eighteenth century: distantiation, alterity, proximity, immanency', in L. Foxhall, H.-J. Gehrke and N. Luraghi (eds), *Intentional History: Spinning Time in Ancient Greece* (Stuttgart) 341–60
Wang, M. (2004) *Zhonggong wushi nian* [*Fifty Years of the CCP*] (originally published in Russian in 1975, tr. Xu Xiaoying) (Beijing)
Whitmarsh, T.J.G. (2025) 'Opportunity and threat: China's new-found enthusiasm for classics', *TLS* (3 January) https://www.the-tls.co.uk/politics-by-region/asian-politics/china-classics-essay-tim-whitmarsh
Wu, L. (1995) *Yi Mao zhuxi: wo qinshen jingli de ruogan zhongda lishi shijian pianduan* [*In Memory of Chairman Mao: Some Major Historical Events I Have Personally Experienced*] (Beijing)
Xiao, J. (2013) *Ya'an riji (1940–1945)* [*Yan'an Diary (1940–1945)*] (2 vols) (Hong Kong)
— (2014) *Xiao Jun riji buyi* [*A Supplement to Xiao Jun's Diary*] (Hong Kong)
Yao, W. (1971) *Yao Wenyuan wenji (1965–1968)* [*Collected Works of Yao Wenyuan (1965–1968)*] (Hong Kong)
Yue, M. (2025) 'Patriotism and resistance through translation: Aeschylus's *Persae* and the ancient Greek past in wartime China', *Classical Receptions Journal* 17.2, 153–70
Zarrow, P. (2011) 'Discipline and narrative: Chinese history textbooks in the early twentieth century', in B. Moloughney and P. Zarrow (eds), *Transforming History: The Making of a Modern Academic Discipline in Twentieth-Century China* (The Formation and Development of Academic Disciplines in Twentieth-Century China) (Hong Kong) 169–207
Zhou, Y. (2022) 'Which tradition, whose authority? Quests and tensions in contemporary Chinese reception of Greek antiquity', *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 6.2, 263–92

Cite this article: Guo Z. Philhellenism, mishellenism and classical reception in modern China. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 15 Nov 2026 at 21:16:25, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075426926100585