

Foreword

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It is daily now in the newspapers: the US-China rivalry. As we almost always do when trying to understand our present, we turn to the past to find useful referents that can help us think about a reality that might be with us for many years to come. It has been interesting to see how these referents have developed. Perhaps a decade ago, when this rivalry was deemed more historically organic, the talk was of the British-German rivalry of the turn of the 20th century. This of course led to World War I, but it seemed organic inasmuch as Germany's rise to domination of the continent seemed an inevitable feature of its population and technological mastery. The older hegemonic power, Great Britain, having risen to its reigning status with the industrial revolution and having organized a foreign policy of power balancing in the continent for over a century, was posed to oppose Germany's command of the continent. It is the seeming inevitability of their clash that was partly the reason China's previous administration insisted on a discourse of a "peaceful rise."

If you open the newspaper today, however, you might note that the historical parallel most often invoked is that of the Cold War. We are now in Cold War 2.0. Quite what this means for the present might rest, then, on how we interpret Cold War 1.0. Or are we now reinterpreting the first Cold War in light of the second? These are some of the live questions the authors are grappling with in this volume's historical essays.

On the whole, the essays demonstrate William Faulkner's poignant maxim: "*The past is never dead. It's not even the past.*" We don't turn to the past to escape the present or fill our minds with esoteric knowledge of long dead things. We study the past not just because it led directly to something or other in the present. We probe and research because how we understand the past is how we understand the present. You can change

that around to say something just as common: how we understand the present often determines how we understand the past. The best kind of historical thinking can sunder our presentist preconceptions, denaturalize our assumptions and cause us to rethink our present moment. But it can never detach the two, because the past is not even the past.

Whether discussing Sun Yat-sen's attachment to Marxism, the nature of the Cold War, or its use as a guide to the US-Chinese rivalry, which are the subjects of some of the essays here, history continues to inform our uncertain present. This is why these essays will give readers interested in the many dimensions of our past and present plenty of fodder for discussion. The History Society's journal is an excellent vehicle for exploring the kinds of questions the university is designed to open up. And the History Society more generally continues to be an essential institution — one of HKU's oldest! — for the promotion and practice of these intellectual pursuits and the community building necessary for them. As Chairman of the History Department, I encourage you to peruse the thinking evident in this volume, to reflect and engage with its conclusions. And I invite you to join HKU's History Society and become a part of this active and essential community to university life.