WESTERN THOUGHT AND CONFUCIANISM:
THE POSSIBILITY OF CONFUCIAN GOVERNANCE

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Abstract. The purpose of this article is to explore how European philosophers have used Confucian characteristics to support their own ideas and theories. The article’s focus of debate is that from the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century a specific group of thinkers appeared: one that used Confucianism to criticize or eulogize Western societies, or American or European politics. As a matter of fact, from Voltaire and Leibniz there have been several Western thinkers that have used Confucian thought to construct a rationalist and humane substitute [to Western thinking] for harmonizing public and government interest.

Keywords: Confucianism, China-Europe relations, Sinology, Chinese political thought.

Since more than 400 years ago, continuous relations between Western (European at first) and China have always been characterized by what some would call debates over the values and ideas of the day. The purpose of this paper is to talk about this long tradition of looking into China in order to show what might be right or wrong with Western thinking on governance and the problems it has to face. What I will try to reveal here is a tradition that started with the Enlightenment thinkers and their reverence to Confucian morals and ethical rule, continued with the appearance of “Oriental despotism” view and moved on to the debate concerning the Western model for modernization, only to reappear with the emergence of the so-called Asian-tigers (the economic development of Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea) and of China itself and the possibility of a Confucian model of governance.

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Lighting the way

The first among the multitude of European thinkers interested in China around the beginning of the 18th century were Leibniz and Voltaire. Voltaire, while he never went to China, got almost everything he knew about Chinese culture from the works of Jesuit priests that started arriving to China as missionaries in the 15th century, and especially from the French Jesuit mission sent by Louis XIV at the end of the 17th century. Paris was the center of Jesuit activities during that period, due to state financing for their missions, and while the Jesuits were mainly interested in their missionary quest, they started to paint some of the few traits of the Chinese civilization that have survived until this day: a rich philosophical foundation, an efficient bureaucratic system and a certain responsibility from the part of the ruler towards the population – observing the political system in its idealized state and not as it really existed.

It was through these books, written by Jesuit missionaries, that Western knowledge of China would start gaining the appreciation it has always had towards Chinese thought: meeting an older civilization, one that could scientifically attest its origins (especially since it was the Jesuits that were put in charge of keeping the official calendar at court – an important task considering even foreign relations in the so-called tributary system involved the transmission of the imperial calendar) meant that its rules, laws, and traditions had to be taken into at least into account, and allowed for its own philosophical concepts that revolved around humaneness and reason to influence European thinkers. And it went both ways, of course, as while Jesuit writings were providing European Enlightenment with alternatives to European tradition; they [the Jesuits] were also cultivating Chinese literati in order to accomplish their evangelical mission.

Misrepresentations were made, such as thinking about Confucianism as a monotheistic religion in European tradition and with relatable ethics. In the context of the Enlightenment and its anticlerical character, Voltaire (1694-1778) started writing about China’s social structure, the great inventions, and the influence he thought Confucianism had in the society to show that morality and reason are possible in places that lack powerful clerical establishments. It helped that at this time China was ruled by what were later to be recognized as the great emperors of the Qing dynasty: Kangxi (1654-1722) and Qianlong (1735-1799).

Voltaire did possess the view of a Chinese civilization equal on its merits with his own, but he never forgot to impose his own beliefs on it. Even his grand gesture of opening his world history – *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations* – with China was to use what he had learned to support his own ideas about the separation of church and state and of rule by reason. According to a recent quote, by not investigating further on what the Jesuits have been misleading on, he

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ended “depicting a government of refined Confucian deists in counterpoint to the barbarities and superstitions of Europe”\textsuperscript{4}.

While it is easy to fault Voltaire for seeing only what was beneficial to their own set of beliefs, it is also true that other thinkers, like Leibnitz, did see a civilization that cultivated arts and sciences, and he attributes any of the existing faults to respect towards the ancestors and language. And he was not alone as Leibniz’s disciple, Christian Wolff (1679-1754), was the first to put forth the idea that the Confucianism is more than adequate as a way of government in a Christian society as its interest is to harmonize the happiness of the individual with the interest of the state\textsuperscript{5}, a theme that is again open to debate.

Another group of thinkers interested in China was that of the Physiocrats. Led by Francois Quesnay (1694-1774), they represented conservative economic thinking, revolving around the idea of living of the land, and were a natural fit for a Chinese government not so keen with private trade and with a considerable anti-mercantilist Confucian baggage. Using the Jesuit descriptions of China, they also painted a glorious painting of China in order to promote their own thinking and while at the height of their influence, the royal courts in France and Austria proceeded in copying the Chinese ritual of plowing of a sacred plot of land by the son of Louis XV and Joseph II of Austria\textsuperscript{6}.

As time passed, they became the only ones still professing such views: Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Montesquieu (1689-1755) saw through the haze a civilization built on different values and morals, a place ruled by fear, not progressing but regressing and losing what it already developed. A despotic place always under the fear of famine, or of other economic problems could not be the equal of a Europe that was developing its economic power and on the brink of political revolution. So one might argue Montesquieu was the first in another long line of thinkers that have warned about China’s inherent despotism and antiquated traditions. However, he does acknowledge an idea that will reappear in a few hundred years or so: that Confucian values did imply responsibility towards the people, even from the greatest tyrant “The Emperor of China is not taught like our princes that if he governs ill he will be less happy in the other life, less powerful and less opulent in this. He knows that if his government be not just he will be stripped both of empire and life”\textsuperscript{7}.

As the French Revolution grew closer, the original picture of China that the Jesuits drew in the minds of European thinkers of the day, of an enlightened kingdom, where ancient moral precepts acted through a highly educated elite in the employ of a responsible ruler, and where religious tolerance was the law of the land was changed into a sketch of a repressive and conservative tyranny. A model initially constructed to show that European exceptionalism wasn’t that exceptional quickly turned to one built to prove the universalism of the same values, as China was weighted and found lacking.

\textsuperscript{5} Derek Boddie, \textit{Chinese Ideas in the west}, Asia for Educators, Columbia University, 2004, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 7.
It was a model build on inexact information, or extremely skewed towards the purposes of the Jesuit missionaries, but it should be noted that this initial view of the political order governing China has not been effectively been challenged even now. There seems to be a debate about the advantages of an authoritarian government that knows it is responsible for the people financial well-being, with its meritocratic system and its long-term view of history and politics, and about the rule by fear that cannot possibly produce the kind of economic development and scientific innovation the West is now seen as capable of. What the outcome will be still rests on how China’s rise will influence the rest of the world.

The beginnings of sinology

While the first part of the 19th century was characterized by the mountains of information that came from China as contact was becoming more intense (through travelers, missionaries, and diplomats), the major developments were of philological nature as the classic cannon became increasingly available in the English and French speaking worlds, and dictionaries became both common and good. Economists and diplomats did touch upon China’s governance and economy and the overall picture changed as it became increasingly obvious that there was nothing healthy or innovative there, as agriculture was still providing for most of the economy and for most of the government coffers, in an era in which Adam Smith (1723-1790) was talking about the “invisible hand” of the market, and Western economies were experiencing the productivity gains of industrial revolution.

It is in the new intellectual environment that a series of Philosophies of History are written, including Herder’s Philosophy of History (1799) where the focus switches on India and China is relegated to the edge of the world, Schlegel’s Philosophy of History (1829) – which uses Abel Remusat’s work and keeps to the idea that Chinese thought is limited in conceiving proper philosophical concepts, and Hegel’s Lectures on Philosophy of World History (1837) that go around the idea that China hasn’t realized freedom, and was left behind by history.

All of them are part of an intellectual effort of making philosophy a domain of European exclusivity and to finish off what was left of European interest toward foreign and Confucian thought. Philosophy becomes a institutionalized discipline, a proper science, and sinology begins to tighten itself to knowledge of China, with no proper place to what we would call today as Chinese thought or Chinese philosophical tradition.

So the debate turns to the idea that due to its traditional thought China is unsuit for modernity: the writing isn’t fit for philosophical inquiry, its governance

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8 The only economic interest came from Marx and his development of the Asian mode of production theory.


becomes a model of Oriental despotism – cruel, short-termed, petty, incompetent. China became an example of what relying on traditional thought and sciences would mean for the developing countries of Europe: Tocqueville and Mill observe that enlightened despotism (or “paternal despotism”) was a well suited way of moving “to the point of civilization”, but it just proved what could happen if tradition would continue unchallenged and simply block any innovation\textsuperscript{12}.

At the beginning of the 1920s and of Republican China, liberal philosophers that started teaching in China for short periods of time, Bertrand Russell among them, started writing about China. Russell writes “The problem of China” after almost a year lecturing in China, and professes that one of the main problems Confucianism has is the overriding of scientific knowledge by ethical considerations, and notes the inclination the Chinese elite has for studying theory rather than the practical way of doing things, pointing out that the most important thing for Chinese thinkers would be to understand Western scientific methods without the amorality of the “mechanistic outlook”.

 Barely a year before, John Dewey held more than 100 conferences in China during the May 4th movement, when an anti-Japanese movement became an outright attack on traditional culture. His book, Transforming the mind of China, is set around the idea that China represents a civilization that has evolved inwardly and is subjected to a time of opening and of democratic tolerance for which it did not have the support needed to prosper\textsuperscript{13} but the interest he had revolved around the traditional pragmatism of Chinese thought, of developing concepts that could be implemented straight away in the fields of history, government and social interaction\textsuperscript{14}. Practical quality, this idea that good political, philosophical and social concepts must be first face reality in order to prove their worth, is one of the few traits of Chinese thought that were still being respected at a time of backwardness and frailty, and it will also make its way into contemporary thinking regarding governance and politics.

After China started its modernization at the end of the 1800s, Confucian thought also got some reconsideration. The relative liberty the autocracy permitted, moral laws like filial piety and the institution of public examinations still got praise from a diplomat turned sinologist such as Giles who along with many others, labored endlessly to translate Chinese history, literature and language for the European public. He was followed by other researchers such as Chavannes, Otto Franke, H. B. Morse, who became the realization of a growing interest of Western rediscovery of Chinese intellectual complexities\textsuperscript{15}.

It is in this period that China starts to attract scholars from other fields. Max Weber, one of the founders of sociology, considered that Confucianism lacked inner tension that guilt provided for protestant ethics, so it just morphed into a

\textsuperscript{12} David Martin Jones, The image of China in Western social and political thought, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 75.

\textsuperscript{13} Thoraval, Joel, La tentation pragmatiste dans la Chine contemporaine in Cheng, Anne, La pensée en Chine aujourd’hui, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 111.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibidem., p. 103.

\textsuperscript{15} Anne Cheng (editor), La pensée en Chine aujourd’hui, Paris, Gallimard, 2007.
form of patience and politeness and cold humaneness, and a monotonous and
uninterrupted work ethic\textsuperscript{16}. It is here that he first circle closes itself, when China
becomes from an alternative to European tradition for Voltaire, to a warning on
what could happen should Western thinking lose its ability to challenge tradition,
to innovate and to reform the way its government and society work. It seemed
that China could not provide for insightful and original interest and that it will
be forever tied to its decaying social and political order.

\textit{The new Chinese model}

After 1949 and the occupation of Beijing, China entered a period of political,
social and cultural isolation. The opening at the beginning of the 1970s has
started a time in which China has never ceased to exist as a threat in the Western
psyche, first as an ideological opponent, and as proposing a new developmental
model that is challenging Western free market capitalism and its link to democratic
institutions and the rule of law.

Confucian values reappeared in Western discourse with the economic, social
and political development of the four Asian tigers (Japan, Singapore, South Korea
and Taiwan) and the success of their technocratic (or bureaucratic) elites that
were seen to be promoting Confucian values such as deference to authority, the
importance of social order and of a capable bureaucracy as a successful combination
for economic development and for the development of modern societies.

So while the study of China became Americanized it also started focusing
more on politics, especially comparative politics. Samuel Huntington, the scholar
who reinstated comparative politics and focused it on comparing modern and
traditional political systems in a world in which the Western democratic system
tended to be considered as a universal success model that could offer both
democracy and sufficient economic development to any country or region that
so desired it, was also the one that disentangled economic development from
political modernization\textsuperscript{17}, while other political scientists began to link a country’s
political tradition to its political and economic development. More to the point,
it was about cultural tradition as a basis for the evolution to democracy, or rather
for supporting authoritarian governments.

In his book, \textit{The clash of civilizations}, he represents the Confucian/Sinic
civilization as valuing the group over the individual, authority over freedoms
and responsibility to the community over individualism. It values hierarchy and
the social order it provides, as well as cooperation in preventing conflicts. On
this model he builds to predict an incoming conflict between the Western liberal
democratic ideals and Eastern Confucian tradition, as cultural identities would
become important sources of conflict after the Cold War.

\textsuperscript{16} David Martin Jones, \textit{The image of China in Western social and political thought}. New York, Palgrave,
2001, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibidem, p. 156.
Right after the Cold war, it seemed that all alternatives to democracy were defeated, but not without irony, it was the thinker who at that time theorized that Western liberal democratic regimes had developed the best political organization, Francis Fukuyama, who also thought about the possibilities of rule by Confucian values. He did so in a time of economic development for most Asian countries, and when economic development became increasingly linked with political liberalization. In an article published a few years after his book *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama reaffirmed the central tenets of Confucianism that Western thinkers still held in high regard in order to support its suitability with democratic societies: meritocracy, an emphasis on education and tolerance and states that Confucianism, by itself, does not mandate authoritarian government.

Fukuyama does make Confucianism responsible for the impossibility of rule of law in China due to its lack of transcendence – his theory is that the rule of law, understood as rules that are binding even on the most politically powerful actors in a given society, has its origins in religion. It is only religious authority that was capable of creating rules that warriors needed to respect\(^\text{18}\). Since China never had this separation between the ruler and the religious class, as it was the Shang, then Zhou ruler who used to sacrifice for the ancestors, it developed law as emanating from the person with power, and devised protection from it by highlighting the importance of benevolence, lax laws in order to prolong political authority.

The modern Chinese state has more in common with the classical one, as bureaucracy is still seen as China’s main historical legacy\(^\text{19}\). In this context, Fukuyama talks about the challenge the Chinese model poses to the evolutionary universality of liberal democracy. As a state forever ruled by law, so not to have developed rule of law, China has made Confucian morality a constraint on power and has delivered these ideas to other East Asian countries (Japan and South Korea among them), contributing to their economic and political success.

In a recent interview, Fukuyama reiterated what has always been a big part of early European fascination with Confucian rule “that’s the legacy of Confucianism: that rulers don’t just rule in their own self-interest; they rule in a sense for the greater good.”\(^\text{20}\) (Heer) A competing system where the greater good is always taken into account, where rationality is not based on one man’s interests or rights or religion, but on one’s responsibility towards society – this is the same idea that Voltaire had. And this takes our discourse back to the symbol of Chinese and Confucian success (although the terms should not be mixed) in Western society: meritocracy through bureaucracy. Revolving around this idea, it has been argued (recently by Daniel A. Bell) that political Confucianism has achieved an effective way of selecting state officials competent enough to guide political systems.
through modernization and even after. While the system is only built to function in Asian countries, and its future seems to be still there, it might become an alternative for Western thinkers who are increasingly disillusioned with the current democratic process. An option would be, according to Bell, to mix Confucian emphasis on rule by meritocratic elites with public participation, accountability and transparency.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Conclusion}

For the last 400 years, Chinese perspectives on governance have often been at the center of China studies. More than that, starting with Voltaire, the Confucian values imbued in the Chinese governance model have always been included in the cross-cultural debate: at first to construct what was to be the first Chinese model (or alternative), and then to explain China’s long road towards scientific and economic development. There are certain disadvantages to such a way of thinking as it does play into this idea of appreciating only pre-imperial thinkers thought and attributing the Chinese label only to such traditions that devolve from it, while not fully understanding how Chinese thought developed during those almost 2,000 years, but since Western thought on China is such as it is: its errors did not directly influence the regard that existed and exists for Chinese political and philosophical tradition.

Certain ideas keep reappearing: about a society ruled by Confucian ethics, about a sometimes efficient or sometimes disastrous bureaucracy, about religious tolerance and adhering to orthodoxy. What never changed was that, for a lot of Western thinkers, Confucian values were always at the core of the debate. They were meant to provide for the rule of an educated elite and of a responsible, yet authoritarian ruler in the case of Voltaire, and for the smooth political modernization of a highly educated, responsible and moral society. At different times, the same ideas were used to explain China’s backwardness in the sciences, its rule by fear apparatus, or the way the new Chinese model strives to achieve economic development by trampling over individual liberties.

The narrative has always played on Western insecurities or strengths and will probably continue to do so in the near future. We seem to have arrived at a point where, after being treated for a long time as just a Chinese peculiarity, the idea of governing modern societies by Confucian ideals is being treated seriously by Western political thinkers.

A lot still rests on how successful China will remain, or rather, on how successfully its modernization, wide term as it is, will play out. If historic and economic trends hold, we will probably experience a world in which governance influenced by Chinese political thought (term used here to add more detail to the more popular one, the Chinese model, and to cover certain characteristics that

aren’t strictly Confucian, but are part of other political thought schools) will be again under the political and scientific scrutiny of the West. It probably won’t spread to other countries that are now undergoing the same process China has been under, with pauses, since the end of the 19th century, or even to the few other Asian countries that can credibly claim a political environment influenced by Confucian ideas. But it will definitively change the focus towards its particular way of government and thinking about politics, finally validating the unique way in which it has handled modernity, and accomplished the great and ancient ideal of becoming a great power.

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