

**Tongdong Bai.** *China: The Political Philosophy of the Middle Kingdom.* London & New York: Zed Books, 2012, World Political Theories Series, viii, 206 pp. ISBN 978 1 78032 076 2 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 78032 075 5 (paperback).

The volume under review is part of a series on world political theories, which focuses on the development and history of political theory and thinking in specific regions or cultures. The aim of this series is to introduce 'fresh ideas and challenges to conventional political theory' (p. i), and this is precisely what the reader can expect from Tongdong Bai's work on 'political philosophy of the middle kingdom' (a somewhat curious title as the more or less unified dynastic China [221 BCE–1912] was an empire and pre-dynastic China, especially the period on which the author focuses [700–200 BCE], was composed of a varying number of contemporaneous kingdoms, which calls for the plural form 'middle kingdoms').

The six chapters that constitute the body of the work set forth Bai's thesis (chapter one), his investigation of three strands of thought in pre-dynastic China, Confucianism (chapters two and three), Daoism (chapter four) and Legalism (chapter five), and concludes with a rather more cursory treatment of 'later developments' (chapter six). This last chapter covers the last two thousand years but, to be fair, what can reasonably be expected from an exposition confined to 200 pages? In fact, it is nothing short of impressive how the author manages to make the most of the limited space available to him.

The thesis Bai advances, and which makes this book unlike any other on the subject, is revealed in the title of chapter one: 'Modernity before its time'. During the periods traditionally known as the Springs and Autumns (*Chunqiu*, 770–476 BCE) and the Warring States (*Zhanguo*, 476–222 BCE [dates as cited by the author]), the area that constitutes large parts of modern Eastern China underwent great changes and transformations that left a mark on virtually every aspect of life in the middle kingdoms. The author finds that the similarities between these changes and transformations 'and the Western modernization are clear and profound' (p. 20). He mentions the demise of the feudal system, the plebeianization of the military, an agricultural revolution (the middle kingdoms entered the iron age during this period) among other things and concludes

If the transition in the West is understood as 'modernization', then it follows that China had already experienced its own modernization of sorts, a few hundred years before the onset of the Common Era – that is, two thousand years before the West! (p. 20)

The author is fully aware that his thesis 'is a bold one, which invites many objections' (p. 177), and 'that many would not accept the understanding outlined here' (p. 24). He also makes it clear that his thesis 'does not maintain that there are no differences between Chinese and Western processes of modernization' (p. 24) although 'even regarding the differences, we need to consider whether, in some cases, these might be merely apparent, with deeper similarities present that were perhaps the product of similar social changes' (p. 24). The corollary of the thesis is that 'early traditional Chinese thought thus constitutes modern philosophy' (p. 156).

In chapters two through five Tongdong Bai proceeds to evaluate political thought as it is presented in received texts attributed to pre-dynastic Chinese thinkers such as Kongzi (Confucius), Mengzi (Mencius), Xunzi, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Shang Yang, and Han Feizi. The author duly notes the problems of authenticity, authorship and date of composition that arise when engaging these texts as well as the problematic labels of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, which was anachronistically applied to these thinkers based on bibliographical categories. Since none of the texts in question was composed as a philosophical treatise, the philosophical issues need to be teased out using the interpretative framework based on the author's hypothesis that the pre-dynastic thinkers of the middle kingdoms addressed concerns similar to those of thinkers embedded in European modernity. Whether or not the reader subscribes to the premise, Tongdong Bai's reading of these texts is original and clear and always contextualized as responses to a changing society (modernization or not) and compared to a selection of modern European thinkers, such as Rousseau and Rawls.

Thus the book under review is a highly readable and provocative introduction to its subject. But it is more than that; throughout the chapters and pages, Bai addresses a number of (as he sees it) misconceptions about the nature of Chinese politics (both historical and contemporary) entertained by Westerners. For example, he confronts the notions of Confucian family relations as cronyism (pp. 39–40) and the idea that 'traditional China was a society of acquaintances' (p. 177). Ideological and philosophical concepts such as freedom, autonomy and the sharp division between private and public, which developed in the West, are also under scrutiny. These and many other issues emerge naturally as the exposition unfolds, and they are mostly presented in the critical but balanced light that inform the best studies of cultural differences. In a number of instances, however, this is not the case, and a clear bias

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against the West on the one hand and against non-Han nationalities in Chinese history on the other materializes.

A couple of examples will suffice. On the topics of imperialism and expansionism, Bai acknowledges that Chinese dynasties at times pursued such politics but

they transformed peoples into Chinese and rendered their land Chinese not simply by killing or oppressing them, in the manner of many Western nation-states and empires, but by 'converting' them through the soft power of a purportedly superior culture. (p. 45)

He goes on to use 'the case of white Americans exterminating American natives' (p. 45) as an example of the former, apparently turning a blind eye to the Qianlong emperor's (r. 1736–1795) campaigns against the Oirat Mongols known as the Zunghars, campaigns that historians have characterized as an explicit policy of extermination and 'arguably the eighteenth century genocide par excellence' (Perdue 2005; Levine 2008: 188). The fictitious historical discourse that 'the Chinese version of soft cultural competition was better than brute conquest and political oppression' (p. 45) is accompanied by another common discourse, namely that of Confucianism as a counterbalance to the authoritarian dynastic regimes. Confucianism (however we define this term) certainly has played such a role at times, but to insist 'that China's past and present regimes have never been authoritarian, thanks largely to Confucian factors' (p. 174) cannot by any stretch of imagination be construed as an adequate characterization of China's political history.

Bai allows that there were exceptions: '[T]he last dynasty, the Qing [1644–1912], was established by invaders of a different ethnicity. To strengthen their rule, they stiffened the authoritarian elements of the traditional Chinese regime' (p. 174). This leaves the reader with the impression that authoritarianism is indelibly linked with non-Han regimes in China's history. However, we need go no further than the preceding dynasty, the Ming (1368–1644), to find several examples of authoritarian (if not despotic) emperors of Han stock. For example, the founder of the dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), who actually supported Confucianism and Confucian scholars, was personally responsible for eliminating his own prime minister and the execution of some 55,000 officials in what has been described as 'the most horrendous bloodbath of civilian violence in human history to that time' (Brook 2010: 90). His successor's ascent to the throne 'was followed by the execution of tens of thousands in a bloodbath that rivaled the worst of his father's purges' (Brook 2010: 92).

Unfortunately, such examples of one-sidedness erode some of the provocative freshness that Bai's book brings to the Western reader who may have 'grown too complacent' (p. 182) to see that China historically has made important contributions to the history of political thought (for example, the British civil service examination system was inspired by and partly based on that of the Qing dynasty) and too indifferent to realize that the political system of contemporary China is part of a long tradition and much more complex than news headlines may suggest. So, notwithstanding the above reservations, Bai has written a valuable and insightful book, which deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in the history of political thought.

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