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**China and England: on the structural convergence of political values**

Responding to Martin Powers, *China and England: The Preindustrial Struggle for Social Justice in Word and Image*

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1. Overview

At the centre of Powers' (2019) *China and England* is an extraordinary forgotten episode in the history of political ideas. There was a time when English radicals critiqued the corruption and injustice of the English political system by contrasting it with the superior example of China. There was a time when they advocated adopting a Chinese conceptual framework for thinking about politics. So dominant and prevalent was the English radicals' use of this framework, that their opponents took to dismissing their points as 'the argument from the Chinese'. (Powers, 2019: 168, 190)

The core historical evidence of this episode is a remarkable set of texts from or about China published in English from the late seventeenth century up to the mid eighteenth century, and subsequent commentaries and adoptions of those texts. Most striking amongst the Chinese texts are accounts of Song dynasty politics and administration. Specifically, the Chinese example was used to bring certain key ideas to England, as posing models of politics for the English to emulate:

* meritocracy, rather than rank and authority as hereditary or at the pleasure of the sovereign;
* equality under the law, rather than legal procedures differentiated by group membership;
* separation of public and private (both a conception of office, and a conception of public good); and
* an ideal of political rule guided by concern for the common people.

The significance of this episode has been downplayed (Powers, 2019: 87), but Powers insists, rightly in my view, that a proper reflection on this episode should result in a profound reconfiguration of our political understandings. (Powers, 2019: 5-6) Both scholars and educated general readers in anglophone countries tend to have an underdeveloped global consciousness, especially when it comes to political values and ideals. Powers claims that the ideals in the texts were genuinely held in China, and were genuinely influential in England. Drawing attention to the Chinese genealogy of various putatively 'western' values undermines civilisational essentialism; in particular, it undermines the way in which civilisational essentialism grounds a certain western exceptionalism.

Powers' book is no ordinary piece of history of political thought, neither with respect to method nor content. Powers makes great use of his disciplinary background as an art historian: he tell his story not only through texts but also with visual evidence:

* images of 'medieval' politics, in both China and England, centred on majesty, symbolism, and supernatural authority;
* images of post-medieval politics, in both China and England, centred on everyday experiences;
* images to show the enthusiastic uptake of Chinese ideas in Europe; and
* images of European progressive politics without reference to Chinese ideas.

Most striking to me was the shift that he traces from good politics being represented through images of majesty and supernatural authority to good politics being represented through images of everyday happiness. (Powers, 2019: 28-45, 62-78) Powers' insistence on a broader cultural contexualisation of written texts adds a richness and force to the arguments which is uncommon in the more standard writings of the history of political thought.

As for content, the book offers new treasures that may surprise even scholars of the history of political thought who do have cross-cultural knowledge. A distinctive feature of the book is its focus on texts of governance and administration from the Song dynasty. (Powers, 2019: 55-60, 154-5) There is a common tendency in studies of Chinese moral and political philosophy to attend exclusively to classical philosophical texts (especially the *Analects* and the *Mengzi*), according to which good politics is simply an extension of individual and communal virtue. In these texts, there is little attention to questions of institutional design, and even a skepticism about its relevance. But this leaves Chinese philosophy open to accusations of political naivete. Powers' treatment of the Song administrative texts shows how Chinese ideals of rulerly virtue were not naive. To the contrary, they could be–and at times were–concretely operationalized.

2. Schematic points of the argument

Without wishing to detract in any way from the achievements of the book, I do have several critical questions to pose to it. For this purpose, let me schematize three key theses of the book. First, we have a *structural thesis*. Powers claims that the determinants of political ideals and values are structural, in the sense that under the same social-political conditions, the same ideals and values will arise anywhere in the world. This is an anti-essentialist thesis for understanding values (different cultures do not have essential values associated with them). There are two sub-claims to the structural thesis.

(a) Powers claims that the emergence of certain values–notably aiming for a meritocratic politics rather than a 'group based' politics (Powers' own term, referring to aristocratically, racially, and/or religiously stratified politics)–presuppose certain levels of cognitive complexity, which in turn seems to rely on educational advancement. (Powers, 2019: 6-9, 26-8, 38, 45)

(b) At other times, the determination of values appears more directly political/institutional, without appeal to educational levels. (Powers, 2019: 51, 89, 124, 214, 219, 223-4, 229)

It is not initially clear whether the structural thesis is established on the basis of the evidence in the book, or if it is a rubric through which to interpret that evidence. Overall, I think it tends more to be a rubric of interpretation. (I'll return to this point.)

Second, we have a *historical thesis*. Powers claims that the Chinese first came up with the various political ideals and values that subsequently were so appealing to the English. He repeatedly remarks that these values were 'alien' to the English prior to encountering them in the Chinese texts. (Powers, 2019: 92, 94, 95, 102, 126, 129, 134) And third, we have a *contemporary thesis*. On the basis of the structural and the historical thesis, Powers rejects the claim that China lacks ideas of 'social justice' and 'human rights'. (Powers, 2019: i, v, 229)

3. Minor critical comments

Starting with the historical thesis, and despite its frequent appearance throughout the book, I am not sure how strongly Powers is committed to it. To start, it is in some tension with the structural thesis: if indeed values arise in response to universal structural features of modern politics, wouldn't it be surprising that all the values were found first in China? In fact, sometimes Powers directly rejects this historical thesis, recognising that there were similar ideas in circulation amongst radicals in England prior to the translation of the Chinese texts. (Powers, 2019: 4-9, 50-51, 89, 124) However, the book gives only passing mention to these radical ideas (Powers, 2019: 50, 128, 136), and on the whole the book reduces English political consciousness to the early modern absolutism of King James and Thomas Hobbes. (Powers, 2019: 32-7, 88) The book also makes implausible claims that the distinction between the benefit of the ruler/ruling class and the benefit of the whole of society was unknown in England. (Powers, 2019: 56) But this distinction is foundational for a very long tradition of European thought, from the classical Aristotelian distinction between good and corrupt regimes, to the early modern republicans and monarchomachs.

Perhaps my observations are grist to the mill of Powers' broader project, because they suggest support for his structural thesis (political ideals arise around the world in response to certain structural features of politics). It seems that Powers could significantly weaken his commitment to the historical thesis without damage to his project. Indeed, when I posed this criticism to Powers directly, he confirmed that his primary commitment is to the structural thesis; while there were interesting moments of historical influence, Powers' more important point is that the English were not somehow civilisationally unique in coming up with the modern political values that we now celebrate.

Turning now to part (a) of the structural thesis, I do wonder why is it so important to Powers to say that certain values and political understandings can only arise with certain levels of education and cognitive development. For first, even if it is true, it is not clear that it is particularly illuminating. Even if a given level of education is necessary for a commitment to Powers' value of social justice, it is certainly not sufficient. Powers himself observes extreme levels of cognitive sophistication in the sciences can readily be found within highly stratified societies. (Powers, 2019: 45) And even when there is a correlation between educational levels and value commitments, it seems to me that both the education and the values are probably driven by deeper social processes (plausible possible contenders include: the transition from peasant to urban life, the intermingling of social groups that results, the dissolution of traditional social divisions by capitalism, the greater penetration of the state into everyday life?). Second, I am not sure that the thesis is true, even on Powers' own evidence. Powers shows that there was a commitment to human equality and non-group-based politics already in classical Chinese texts and in Han dynasty rule, well before the rise of education that he places in the Song dynasty in China and in early modern England. (Powers, 2019: 39, 51-2, 109-11) In sum, I find version (b) of the structural thesis more plausible than version (a), but I didn't feel that the book really needed version (a) to achieve its primary aims.

4. Major critical comment

My major critical comment focusses on version (b) of the structural thesis. Powers claims that the same values or ideals arise inevitably in relation to structural features of political power in complex societies. Powers refers to this cluster of values as 'social justice', or sometimes as 'human rights'. (Powers, 2019: i, 1, 9, 214, 222) Powers' master concept is not just a generic idea of justice, but something more specific. Its primary defining element is its opposition to 'group-based politics', (Powers, 2019: 27-8 & *passim*) but it also holds together other more specific positive values in an orderly way: equality, rights, meritocracy, public/private distinction. (Powers, 2019: 36, 55, 105, 139, 215-22) It matches a certain contemporary conception of American democratic liberalism. (Powers, 2019: 229) But this is not surprising, because in Powers' view, all complex societies will converge upon this single transhistorical and transcultural standard of the good and the just. (Powers, 2019: 8-9)

Powers' discussion of social justice relies on an underlying presumption: that there is a single master-concept of political justice, encompassing all other more specific values and uniting them together; and that all societies tend towards recognising it. There is a single linear scale between irrational and rational politics, and history moves forwards along this scale. The normative endpoint is known; historical inquiry searches for earlier stirrings of this ideal. It is through this presumption that an assortment of specific historical instances, legal procedures, and political incidents can be read as adding up to a single moral phenomenon.

But this presumption is quite contentious. It positions Powers firmly on one side of a contentious debate about historical methodology (see for instance Israel, 2010; Moyn, 2010). On the one side, where Powers stands, we have Whig historians, church historians, who have confidence in both their knowledge of the moral goal and the movement of history towards it (for instance, Jonathan Israel, 2001). On the other side we have historians of a more Nietzschean sensibility (for instance, Samuel Moyn, 2012). This second type of historian asks: what if there is no unambiguous and unique final universal value? What if the values in fact governing different societies are different; or even if some of the values are more or less the same, what if they combine in different ways? And what if history moves non-linearly, such that stirrings of certain values in the past only led contingently to the present, and could have (and in different societies may in fact have) led different ways? What if the elements currently held together as a rationally unified single ideal might be separable and not naturally or necessarily joined? All of these possibilities are obscured *ex ante* by the whig historian's method.

Let me show how this problem of method might apply to Powers' book. It could be true that the Chinese tradition has all of the good things that he discusses in detailed specificity:

* a notion of office, a division between public and private;
* meritocracy;
* rejecting group-based politics; and
* a notion of common good.

Yet at the same time it could also be true that there is a coherent Chinese moral-political vision of society that contains all the above elements but also:

* lacks a concept of rights;
* accepts a hierarchical society; and
* is fundamentally not individualist.

As suggestive evidence for this claim, I take not my own opinion, nor that of other western commentators, but voices from within China (thereby avoiding the problem of Europeans projecting their own problems on China (Powers, 2019: 20)). And I think what is at stake is not a failure to live up to accepted ideals (that would be double standards, requiring China to live up to its own ideals more than Europe lives up to its (Powers, 2019: 61-62)), but rather a commitment to final ideals which are interestingly distinct from Powers' master-ideal.

The key political concept in the Confucian tradition appears to be humaneness (*ren*), as well as perhaps propriety (*li*). This takes political shape in two ways. First, a ruler should be benevolent and proper. They should themselves be virtuous, and their virtue will radiate out to the population; the population will respond to their virtue's magnetism. (See for instance, *Analects* 2.1; 12.19.) Second, the virtuous individual should try to extend their benevolence beyond their immediate self, to encompass ever expanding circles of others. (See for instance, *Mengzi* 1A7.)

This might bear some similarity to contemporary ideas of meritocratic rule and universal politico-moral concern. However, late nineteenth century thinker Liang Qichao makes explicit for us how they are different. Liang explains that the Chinese focus on benevolence *as opposed to rights* gives rise to subjects without 'rights consciousness'–in consequence, leaving them without resource and like meat for slaughter if their ruler should happen not to be benevolent. Liang takes the English as exemplars of the rights-consciousness that he believes to be lacking amongst Chinese. (Liang, 2015: 9-14) Focussing in on universality and equality, twentieth century thinker Chen Duxiu explains that the Chinese focus on benevolence within a system of ritually ordered proper relationships requires a degree of political (and gender!) deference incompatible with the modern republicanism that he finds appealing from western sources. (Chen, 2015: 70-74) Certainly, it is interesting and noteworthy that this deference didn't take hereditary form, but that hardly erases the profound emphasis on deference.

Turning now to the question of individualism. Powers argues that China offers an individualistic and meritocratic social form, rather than a group-based one. But contemporary sociologist Fei Xiaotong argues that the structure of Chinese society is neither individualistic nor group-based, but relational (Fei, 1992: 67). Whereas Powers contrasts individualistic versus group organisation (Powers, 2019: 28), for Fei these two options both fall within the 'organisational mode of association', which is to be contrasted with the 'differential mode of association' (Fei, 1992: 60-70).

In this 'differential mode of association', each person is the centre of their own relational network. Fei offers a vivid image to understand the difference: in the organisational mode, imagine bundles of straw bound together to make larger stacks of hay; in the differential mode, imagine the widening circles on the surface of a pond when a rock is thrown. On the former, you are a member or not; on the latter, there are not clean membership statuses, but rather, degrees of connection. (Fei 1992, 60-63) Within the differential mode of association, care for humanity does not rest on the universal attribution of equal status to all human beings as individuals. Rather, the moral virtuoso's benevolence rests on their success in widening the reach of their concern, out through more and more distant relational connections (self, family, local community, wider community, the world), and not the attribution of universal status. (Fei, 1992: 66-70) Indeed, in the tradition, Confucians opposed both the Mohists and the Buddhists for their dangerous and irresponsible abstract egalitarianism which failed to give central importance to propriety within in actual relationships. (Fei, 1992: 79)

Fei holds that the differential mode is characteristic of most of Chinese society, even if it sometimes coexists with the organisational mode. Its political consequence is a particular way of understanding identity and obligation. You give and receive through your relationships, and not in virtue of your status, either individual or group. There are not rights, but instead there are roles and proper bounds of behavior in relation to those roles, and conduct is brought into line with roles through a deep life-long moral educational shaping. (Fei, 1992: 117)

What is the upshot of these various differences that I am suggesting between political ideals of China and Powers' master value of social justice? These differences suggest that rather than there being a single correct and rational response to the human political condition, different combinations and weightings of considerations are possible. Meritocracy needn't necessarily be good at checking abuse of power; non-group-based politics needn't be individualistic or respectful of rights. Meritocratic China may have featured equality before the law, but at the same time, it featured a Confucian insistence on people performing their proper roles within key relationships and it lacked a conception of rights.

It might be objected that I have offered an unsupportable characterisation of Chinese political thought. For one instance, consider the value of deference. According to my sketch above, Liang criticizes Chinese political culture for valuing deference. But the Han and Song dynasty evidence presented by Powers documents well-established practices of frank criticism of governance and of rulers. (Powers, 2019: 143-165) Thus, whatever the merits of Liang's claims regarding his late nineteenth century context, they cannot be fair as a sweeping characterization of Chinese politics *tout court*. For another instance, even if Confucianism is hierarchical and relational, the same cannot be said of the Mohists' universalism. But I am happy to grant these points. For they show that the Chinese political tradition is internally diverse, both synchronically and diachronically–I'm sure there are many other dimensions of diversity that could be pointed out beyond these two. But this suggests that there is no convergence on a single master political value even within a single tradition, let alone across cultures.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Indeed, more generally, and beyond the Chinese case, there are deep tensions between some of the conceptual elements that Powers puts together: meritocracy versus equality; meritocracy versus democracy; benevolence versus rights. Other elements, even if not in tension, have no necessary connection and can come apart: for instance equality before the law and social justice (in the narrow sense of social democratic provision); rule of law and egalitarianism; meritocratic government and respect for rights. The connection between these conceptual elements cannot be taken for granted but rather, it needs to be forged, and there will be different ways in which this might be done.

Nothing here detracts from the core contributions of the book, in showing the significance of the Chinese influence on seventeenth and eighteenth century English thought, and in showing the independent Chinese development of certain kinds of political ideas commonly presumed to be the exclusive possession of the 'west'. Furthermore, I am not saying that the English radicals of that time were wrong to draw on Chinese ideas. Rather, my point is that there is no unique perfect rational set of political values to guide life in complex societies. When the English radicals drew out what was useful to them from the Chinese texts, they would have tailored the results to their own problems and attempted to integrate them with their own prior value commitments. Some loose version of Powers' structural thesis might be defensible,[[2]](#endnote-2) but not the strong form which presumes the generic problems of any complex society lead to convergence on the exact same set and ranking of values.

5. Contemporary consequences

My criticism of Powers' structural thesis have implications for his contemporary thesis. Powers shows that Song dynasty China developed a notion of office and demanded that political rule focus on the common good; he shows how these ideas were explosive politically when they were received in England in the eighteenth century. This is all very valuable. But how does this relate to Powers' master notion social justice, and its linked notion of human rights? Powers succeeds in showing that early modern Chinese politics endorsed some of the elements of his 'social justice'. But if we do not presume that all the particular values involved in Powers' social justice stand or fall together, we cannot take the presence of certain elements to prove the presence of others. In particular, the evidence put forwards does not support an early modern Chinese commitment to an idea of human rights as universal binding moral claims tied to every human subject.

In no way do I mean to reestablish the notion of civilisational essences. The Nietzschean historical perspective is just as hostile to civilisational essences as is Powers himself. The state of the moral universe of a culture at a given point in space and time says nothing of its future possibilities. This applies equally to England and China. Powers observes that the English only jettisoned their commitment to social hierarchy based on heredity relatively recently. In the same spirit, the weakness within the Chinese tradition of some of the values that Powers holds dear does not indicate any deep problem for China. If I am correct that the early modern Chinese political tradition lacked a robust notion of rights, but if the Chinese came to or come to find such a notion useful, then by all means they should develop such a notion. If the tradition was hierarchical (albeit meritocratic hierarchy), but that is no longer useful, then by all means, reject hierarchy. Indeed, in this project perhaps it will be useful to reach into the past of Chinese history–for instance, Chinese thinkers concerned about the deeply patriarchal elements of Confucianism might find it strategic to bring forward the fabulous historical images that Powers shares with us of women engaged in artistic and scholarly pursuits (Powers, 2019: 16-8) as local inspiration for their struggle. But we cannot presume that all roads lead to a single master-understanding of social justice, which will be shared in all places around the world.

Despite my criticisms of Powers' three key theses, the broader point of the book is still well taken: that seventeenth and eighteenth century England rightly looked to China for inspiration to develop some of what came to be England's own core political and institutional values. This historical episode upends various contemporary truisms about the nature of global politics, and disturbs the self-satisfied self-understandings of anglophone political philosophy. And this is a necessary intervention us today.

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 Indeed, a similar point might be made with respect to Powers' own willingness for assimilate his master value of social justice with the contemporary American meaning of 'social justice warrior'. (Powers, 2019: 214) In so doing, he reveals an understanding of contemporary Anglophone political landscape in which there is one clearly correct and moral view, that of the 'social justice warriors', and all deviation from this view reflects retrograde or sectional interests. But this understanding puts him at odds with the contemporary discipline of political theory, which takes for granted that moral-political questions are complex and ambiguous, resulting in deep and enduring differences amongst conscientious thinkers of political value. A Marxist, a communitarian, and a libertarian simply disagree on what the just society looks like, and their differences are unlikely to be overcome by the march of reason. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For instance, El Amine's structural account of value convergence is grounded the more profound similarities and interlinkage of global experiences of a much later time period. (El Amine, 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)