



Liang, Zhiping 梁治平, *Conducting Government: Ideas of Governance in Ancient China* 為政：古代中國的致治理念
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In his book, LIANG Zhiping 梁治平 provides a history of “grand notions” (*daguannian* 大觀念) (5) that essentially shaped China. Despite the disintegration of the old civilization, some of these notions, according to the author, are still alive and will continue to affect how Chinese think in social and political domains. The author explores these notions, their origins, uses and abuses, changes of meaning, and (partial) collapse as a value system. Taken together, the book depicts what the old China looked like and how it gradually transformed into the China we know today. The book’s title, *Wei Zheng* 為政, is taken from the first line of book 2 of the *Analecets*. Liang’s intention is to include everything that constitutes China: economy, law, culture, religion, morality, politics, and so on—that is what “conducting government” naturally entails in its traditional rendition. However, the aspiration of the book is more than descriptive. It has an additional purpose to serve: “A truly serious study on the history of thoughts will surely help us understand what is happening now” (9).

In an important sense, then, the book resembles Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*. Both authors recourse to the history of thoughts to shed light on problems at hand. Both look deeply into the trajectory of ideas—“virtue” in MacIntyre’s case, and “all under heaven” (*tianxia* 天下), serving the public (*weigong* 為公), people-centered humanism (*minben* 民本), family-nation (*jiaguo* 家國), and ritual-law (*lifa* 禮法) in Liang’s case—so as to form a better understanding of the past and now. Both combine conceptual exploration with a sobering sense of reality so that they are both motivated by a sense of crisis. In Liang’s case, though, such a crisis should by no means be exaggerated, for, unlike MacIntyre, Liang does not take a moral or political problem as the point of departure, and he is not interested in finding a solution throughout the book. Yet a sense of crisis is nevertheless evidently present. It is the crisis of the dissolution (*wajie* 瓦解) of the traditional value system, with *tianming* 天命 (mandate of *Tian*) at its pinnacle. Following the discrediting of *tianming*, that which depended on it, *jiaguo*, *tianxia*,

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weigong, and so on, fell apart correspondingly. We may still refer to these notions today, but we use them to mean different things.

It is not a sad story Liang tells—far from it. In fact, he puts most of his efforts into the clarification of trajectories of grand notions, and what we read thereby is more an objective history of grand notions than a normative search for a solution. Since in the process of clarification Liang does not lose sight of the interactions between notions and the world to which such notions were to apply, he does not indulge himself in the enterprise of idealization. As a scholar devoted to what he calls the hermeneutics of legal culture, he is at his best when he examines the unfolding of these notions.

According to Liang, there is a critical appraisal and subsequent disenchantment of almost every notion in the final years of the Qing 清 dynasty. Although the disenchantment had different causes, all can be traced to the collapse of the innocent belief in *tianming*. *Tianming* held together the political, cultural, and institutional systems of an empire that was so vast and appeared so everlasting, its spiritual demise bespoke the end of these systems and the monarchy they supported. Take *tianxia*, a notion constitutive of the ancient monarchy, as an example. A notion that governed the monarchy's exercise before China emerged as a nation-state, *tianxia* contained three crucial elements: *tianming*, emperor, and the people (16). The emperor had to pay tribute to *tianming* and cater to the people's needs in order to maintain himself as a legitimate embodiment of *tianming*. In this sense, the universality of *tianxia* comes from the universality of *tianming*: "That *tianxia* is universal means all people have the same human nature (*tianxing* 天性), and the civilization and moral order governing them are universal as well" (26). The disenchantment of *tianming* spelled the end of *tianxia*, which rested on a universal, cosmological order.

People-centered humanism (*minben* 民本) suffers the same fate. "The ancient idea of *minben* has an inseparable element, namely, *tian* 天 (heaven)" (141). The understanding that *min* 民 (the masses) were taken care of by a benevolent emperor embodying *tian* ceased to make sense once the latter was no longer credible and lost its control over mundane issues. Coupled with this loss of credibility was the organic relation between *tian* and its incarnation, who was supposed to be selfless (*wusi* 無私) and concerned only with the people's interest. Small wonder that fierce criticism sprang up against the idea of people-centered humanism by scholars such as HUANG Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–1695), GU Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682), and WANG Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), once such relations were no longer organic and plausible. It is worth emphasizing that the criticism was internal to Confucianism, in the sense that it was not mounted by non-Confucian scholars or by scholars influenced by ideas external to Confucianism. They were Confucian scholars, and as Confucian scholars they were given ample room to express their discontents *within* a Confucian-legalist regime. This internality is important because it shows how, under propitious circumstances, Confucianism can unfold itself. More specifically, when the Confucian notion of people-centered humanism is allowed to run its natural course, a dynamic is revealed that such a notion has the capacity of self-reflection, which then poses severe challenges to that which gives significance to the notion in the first place, namely, *tianming*. This dynamic represents the vitality of Confucianism. Its opposite—the hyperstability of Confucian China (JIN Guantao's 金觀濤 term)—is due to political rather than epistemological or moral reasons.

However, what constitutes this dynamic? Liang does not address the problem directly. He hints at an answer when discussing the dual understanding of *min* in Confucianism. On the one hand, Confucianism believes that *min* are passive and politically blind, waiting to be cultivated, ruled, and cared for by the emperor. *Min*, thus understood, are not and can never be self-sufficient political entities (such as citizens). On the other hand, *min* are understood as politically more important than the emperor, who has to take *min*'s happiness and prosperity seriously in order to be a fitting and qualified ruler (*mingui junqing* 民貴君輕) (174–175). It is this second understanding that renders the dynamic possible. It is debatable whether there is still a big gap between this understanding and the people as active citizens, but there is no denying that the tension between the two understandings opens up a space for the exercise of *min*'s critical capacities. When the political atmosphere was not so oppressive, as was the case during the Ming 明–Qing dynasty transition, these capacities would confront grand notions' applications in practice. Such confrontation eventually led to the questioning of *tianming* and the emperor's benevolent traits, and so on.

According to Liang, when this occurred, it was a small step from the disenchantment of the value of the family-state (*jiaguo* 家國). The latter indeed occurred when Western political ideas were introduced into China, and its people started to feel unsatisfied with politics being treated as private issues of the imperial court (*caoting* 朝廷), with and sometimes without the counsel of courtiers who alone could attend the court and make decisions that affected almost everyone. People accused the old politics of knowing only imperial court politics, not the politics of a state (*guojia* 國家)—a crucial distinction (equivalent to the modern distinction between the political and the social), as we now can see with more clarity. Demand grew to remove politics from the imperial court and place it under the people's control. Accordingly, politics was considered to concern issues that affected all citizens in a country—no longer a private issue, and no longer confined to limited concerns. New politics required no mediators and could only be managed by the affected directly. This is emphatically what the people's state (*minguo* 民國) meant. If family-state confused imperial court and state, then the people's state wanted to assign an independent status to citizens by freeing them from the control of the family and imperial authorities, on the one hand, and securing the autonomous role of the social by giving it an independent political and moral standing, on the other. It is in this sense that “people's state (*minguo*) is not only a name of state but also a modern form of state” (249).

Obviously, this modern form of state emerged out of the debris of the old regime. The old Confucian-legalist regime was broken down, and a new regime was founded, supposedly, on a new foundation, one that featured by the separation between the political and the social. This did not materialize, however (at least not for long) before the party-state (*dangguo* 黨國) as a new form of state took over (250). The disenchantment (of *tianming*) manifested in the shift from family-state to people's state was replaced by a form of reenchantment (that is, by communism) that blended the political and the social once again. As a comprehensive doctrine, what the party advocates allows no formal separation between the political and the social, with the result that whatever is political is mandated to be social. It is no exaggeration to say that the new grand notion (communism) occupies the chair left empty by the disappearance of *tianming*. What has changed and what has remained the same? What kind of problems arose in the transition from people's state to party-state? These are questions left open by Liang.

Additional remaining questions are: Can the party-state manage what the people's state left behind, namely, the awakening of self-consciousness, the advent of civil society, and the apparent irresistibility of equality? If, thanks to the Cultural Revolution, the answer to the question is positive, then with the reform and opening up, can the party-state still keep the political and the social together without creating grievances and fanning resentment? Bearing in mind the crisis of the collapse of the traditional value system, what options are available for China, caught between the old and new? Finally, what should China opt for, given these inconsistencies and contradictions? Or is it that China as a party-state has its own agenda to pursue, so these inconsistencies and contradictions are impossible to remove?

These are the questions we cannot help asking upon reading Liang's thought-provoking book. It is evident that in the book Liang is more interested in the past than the present, and he writes with a promising hope that past experience can illuminate the way we comprehend the current situation. There are many layers in his narrative of the past concerning grand notions. It would help if he would provide a causal explanation regarding what leads from one layer to another, for such an explanation can not only link the past and the present but also help us orient ourselves. Crucial to this orientation is the understanding that answers given to the current problems are worthy of serious consideration only if we know where we are from and how. In this sense, a causal examination of historical Confucianism is much needed; but for that, we will have to wait for Liang's future works.

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