

Reply to Mab Huang

Edmund Ryden

“In the face of a bloated state, culture withers away”

(Mab Huang, *China at the Crossroads*)

There is much in Professor Huang’s paper that could be described as the collective commonsense of the Western media, and thus neither original or new, but there are also statements which show a philosophy of political society that underlies all of Professor Huang’s writing.¹ He is in favour of a lively, pluralist civil society in China, as much as anywhere else in the world. With this position I am in full agreement and take the opportunity here to indicate some of the background to this view and to expand on its necessity in the light of contemporary Chinese political daydreams.

A place for civic society

To trace the separation between Church and state back to the Bible is perhaps overdoing things. Even to ascribe it to the existence of Judaism and later Christianity in the Roman Empire is perhaps unnecessary, but at least with the medieval conflicts between the Church and secular rulers and the existence of parallel juridical systems, the idea that the state could not encroach on the whole of a person’s life became a fundamental principle of political philosophy. While Calvin’s Geneva tried to make the state subordinate to the church and Elizabethan England sought to place the church in the state’s pocket, modernity broke these ties and gave rise to a civic space that was secure from the state. John Stuart Mill is the classic exponent of such a position, arguing passionately if not logically, for toleration of diverse

1 The following passage is the most prescient: “For many decades in China, not only have the people suffered from violations of rights and freedoms, equally detrimental to the nation, creativity and imagination was being punished. As a result, no great art, poetry, painting, architect, theatre, both in the traditional or contemporary mold, nor any world-class achievement in ethics, political philosophy, or practical ideas in government have emerged. In the face of a bloated state, culture withers away.”

opinions and championing the right of dissenters, heretics and anyone who refused to conform to oppressive normativity (Mill, 1859).

In “John Stuart Mill and the Ends of life”, Isaiah Berlin gives a powerful defence of Mill’s position (Berlin, 2008: 218-251). He notes that of the three reasons Mill suggests may be voiced against dissent—namely to retain one’s own power, to enforce uniformity and to believe that there can only be one way of living—it is the third which deserves the greatest opposition, since pursuit of power for oneself or enforcement of one’s own model as the only possible one are hardly universalizable goals for any society. The belief that there can be only one way of living, however, is one that is so common both in China and Europe that it requires more effort to indicate its error, yet to compel an opinion to silence supposes that we “assume our own infallibility” (Mill, 1859: 95). True, Mill is unable to say why there cannot be one unitary view of how best to live, and he is incoherent in explaining how bizarre ideas can truly be beneficial, yet Berlin provides an answer in situating Mill’s basic assumption in the belief that human knowledge is never complete and always fallible. There is no “single discoverable goal, or pattern of goals, the same for all mankind” (Berlin, 2008: 233). It is this belief that underlies Professor Huang’s advocacy of civil society as an open forum for creative discussion in contrast with the desire of the Party and government of China to impose a uniform political creed.

Chinese political daydreaming

The nature of China’s creed may have something to do with Marx, or perhaps with Lenin, but it relies on a background of political daydreaming found in the works of authors such as Jiang Qing, Yan Xuetong, Zhu Suli [known as Su Li] and Zhao Tingyang (all writing in the first two decades of this century).² Jiang Qing starts from Huang Zongxi’s *Mingyi Daifanglu* (written in the seventeenth century but only publicly known in the nineteenth).

2 Jiang Qing. 2013. *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China’s ancient past can shape its political future.* (Daniel A Bell & Fan Ruiping eds.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Su Li. 2018. *The Constitution of Ancient China.* (Zhang Yongle & Daniel A Bell eds.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Yan Xuetong. 2011. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power.* (Daniel A Bell & Sun Zhe eds.), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Zhao Tingyang. 2018. *Tianxia: tout sous un même ciel: l’ordre du monde dans le passé et pour le future.* Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf. (The last book exists in an English translation: Joseph E. Harroff. 2021. *All under Heaven: The tianxia system for a possible world order.* However, the translation is not as good as the French version).

He proposes a tiered parliament with the top echelon composed of Confucian scholars. Whilst his theory is anachronistic it places leadership in the hands of a small group of persons who are experts in Confucian culture. Yan Xuetong starts from international relations and suggests that modern China should take up the idea of hegemony from ancient Chinese political philosophy, believing that Chinese hegemony with its Confucian moderation would be better than that of the USA, which he associates with naked power.

Su Li reads the Chinese political tradition as one of selecting persons of merit to work in the state. Its constitution then is a meritocracy shaped by the use of the Chinese script and the Chinese classics but at the service of the state. Zhao Tingyang stresses the attraction of a uniform Chinese script and its accompanying bureaucracy for the nomadic peoples surrounding the central plain. Even if they succeed in gaining political power over the state, they cannot avoid being sucked into the vortex of Chinese culture which ultimately converts them into traditional Chinese rulers.

These scholars may disagree on the formation of the experts and the exact role they need to play in governance, but all subscribe to a view that there can be only one uniform government for China, a government that naturally attracts other peoples under its hegemony. It is not difficult to see that the present leadership in China is quite happy with this position even if the set texts are those of President Xi and not the classics of yore. It is a view which coopts civil society into the state, which identifies culture, nation and state as one entity. There is no space for the civic space Professor Huang seeks.

Nation and state are distinct

Western political thought had to learn the lesson that ‘nation’ and ‘state’ are two separate entities. The Jewish (later Christian) philosopher, Edith Stein, defends a view of the state as the framework of law which englobes a variety of nations or cultures (Stein, 1989). The danger is when a particular ‘nation’ or ‘culture’ or set of ideas seeks to arrogate the state to itself (Stein, 1989: 53-54).³ The approved experts do not only propose one solution to

3 Stein believes that the concept of the ‘nation’ is dangerous and unnecessary. “It tends to conflate the communities (often reduced to one dominant community) that inhabit the territory with the citizens who form the ‘people’ who make up the state. The ‘people’ is a legal term that involves elections, registration and taxation; whilst the ‘communities’ are formed by culturally, linguistically, territorially, and genealogically linked persons”.

governance, they combine this with culture and suggest that there are questions that never need to be asked and so ensure uniformity: “Plato saw correctly that if a frictionless society is to emerge the poets must be driven out” (Berlin, 2008: 241-2). The Chinese daydream claims that not only was Plato right, but that, in China, there has neither been, nor can ever be, an alternative view.

This short comment is not the appropriate place to challenge the whole project of the afore-mentioned Chinese scholars. Suffice it, though, to comment on one point. Both Su Li and Zhao Tingyang make a case for the role of the Chinese script in unifying China. Script is surely a cultural asset and yet here it plays the role of the state. Culture and state are thus wed. There is no doubt that the script and the scholar-officials who used it did create a system of uniformity. Yet, it should be noted that the script did not, historically, obliterate the diverse languages of China—Cantonese, Hakka, the Wu language—nor did it succeed in any successful transcription of the ‘barbarian tongues’.

The latter point, *pace* Zhang, requires a note. The attempt to transcribe Vietnamese in Chinese characters—the *nom* script devised by Buddhists—cannot possibly work as a universal method of writing. It is too complicated and requires a knowledge of southern Chinese languages, such as Cantonese, as well as Vietnamese to be read correctly. Likewise, the Chinese-style script devised for Tangut (a Sino-Tibetan language) can hardly be counted a success. Even today, while modern Cantonese has devised a means of transcribing the language using Chinese characters, it does so largely by a borrowing of phonetic elements, whilst the script for other southern Chinese languages is still only in its early stages. The only script before the Latin alphabet to cross languages in China was the 'Phags-pa script, which could be used for the Indo-European Sanskrit and Persian, for Tibetan and Chinese, and for the Turkic Uyghur and Mongolian (and even influenced Korean Hangul). Chinese characters are too closely bound to the Mandarin Chinese language to successfully serve other languages.

Whilst Mandarin Chinese provided a uniform script and language for the state, like the Latin of Europe, it never suppressed the popular cultures of the regions, just as imperial Confucianism never eradicated popular religions or Buddhism. Simply because the state language was backed by the central plains culture does not mean that the central culture can be the only culture

for all of China. Indeed, it is more correct to say that the Chinese state borrowed aspects of the central plains culture such as state exams, Mandarin Chinese and the Confucian classics, which performed, and still perform, a role in unification at the level of the state, whilst leaving local cultures, be they in Chinese or non-Chinese languages, to flourish on their own. It is only since 1949 that the Chinese state has sought to use the elements of uniformity present in the imperial state to suppress the diversity that was once present in the many cultures under the rule of that state.

That imposition of state uniformity at the expense of cultural diversity must be challenged. The hundred flowers need to bloom and keep on blooming. Professor Huang stands for a Chinese political philosophy that allows for “variety, movement, individuality of any kind” (Berlin, 2008: 242). For this to happen it is necessary to allow space for civic discussion and freedom for ‘heresy’, it is also necessary to challenge the cooption of Chinese culture—albeit in its current Xi Jinping dress—as the only possible culture for the state.

Global stewardship

Professor Huang has explicitly asked me to comments on his proposal for a fairer redistribution of resources throughout the world. Perhaps, here Zhao Tingyang’s “new *tianxia*” does have something to offer. Noting that *tianxia* takes the world as a whole and that modern China cannot claim exclusive power over *tianxia*, Zhao writes: “A new *tianxia* system lies most probably in the establishment of a unified authority of stewardship and supervision over all global systems, a comprehensive world authority of stewardship-supervision notably over global financial exchanges, the global internet and worldwide technology” (Zhao, 2016: 280).⁴ Characterising the *tianxia* of the Zhou dynasty as a system of stewardship and supervision over the Chinese states subject to the Zhou king, Zhao predicts a similar logic for the new *tianxia*: “the new *tianxia* system will most probably be a network of stewardship-supervision by the global systems that the world enjoys in common” (Zhao, 2016: 280). This idea is not too far-fetched since it already

4 新天下系統更可能是建立在各種全球系統之上的統一監護和監管權力，特別是對全球統一的金融系統、全球共有的互聯網和全球共享的技術系統的世界整體監護－監管權力。新天下系統有可能是一個由世界共有的機構來監護－監管各種全球系統的網絡體系。（For the published French and English versions of this book see note 2 above: Zhao Tingyang 2018: 292 & 2021: 245.）

exists in various global agreements and is so obviously required by global warming and pandemics such as Covid-19. No state can solve these global problems alone. They are global issues and require a global response.

Zhao's use of the paired terms *jianhu* 監護 (stewardship) and *jianguan* 監管 (supervision) is helpful. The use of the term *jian* 監 (oversight) points out the common global perspective that is required. The term *guan* 管 (regulation) can cover 'management' and 'regulatory norms' and used alone might suggest a kind of world administration—using this word in the American sense as close to the British term 'government'—in fact Zhao does not seek a world government. Hence, he tempers *guan* by using the term *hu* 護 (protection), which I translate as 'stewardship'. States must realise that they are not masters of the air, the sea, the land or the people. States exist to help in the gestion of land, sea and air for the benefit of all the world's peoples. A fairer distribution of resources can be part of that role of stewardship.

Just as the state is a framework within which peoples and their diverse cultures can flourish, so too the global network of states is one of stewardship and supervision on behalf of all peoples.

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