Chinese Sage Kings and the Hobbesian State of Nature: Bridging Comparative Political Thought and International Relations Theory

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Chinese Sage Kings and the Hobbesian State of Nature: Bridging Comparative Political Thought and International Relations Theory

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In this volume, the authors seek to address a fundamental concept in political thought—the “state of nature”—through a comparative and cross-cultural dialogue. In doing so, we can all recognize that the Hobbesian “state of nature” is a mental exercise, it is a classic gedankenexperiment—carried out in imagination only. In part, this is because the “state of nature” qua Hobbes can only exist via an imaginary world—human beings, out of biological reality and necessity, are social animals. The erstwhile “state of nature” is an idealized and artificially constructed before-time that is used as the basis for arguments about proper uses of political power, where and why political legitimacy originates, as well as arguments about the “natural” conditions of humankind. The challenge is to see if the thought experiment holds when exported from its original context.

As a thought experiment built upon the pre-social “initial position” of man (sic), the “state of nature” necessarily carries implications for how we view individuals, government, and even inter-governmental relations. First, it allows for a basic consideration of human nature, allegedly removed from the trappings of society or culture. Second, it considers the “proper” role of government, particularly when interacting with the individuals that constitute the social-contracting, body politic. Third, and more important for this chapter, in the field of International Relations
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The "state of nature" holds a special position: it is used as a homologue to characterize relations among modern nation-states under conditions of anarchy. It is this issue of anarchical relations—that occur in an environment characterized by a lack of higher sovereign political authority—that resonates so powerfully for IR scholars, as this vision of anarchy is said to characterize relations among nation-states. Thus, for many IR scholars (critics or otherwise), Hobbes' vision holds mortmain for discussions about power, potential for global governance, and the basic quality of state sovereignty under conditions of anarchy.

This chapter also contributes to a growing interest in non-Western approaches to International Relations, and this volume should be of special interest to scholars working from a constructivist IR perspective. Basic questions about human nature and what constitutes "good governance" are universal. Yet the answers to these universal questions are surprisingly varied, and are mediated through the filter of religion, historic experience, and other elements of culture. This thereby serves as a means of examining the larger relevance comparative political thought holds for international relations theory. As mentioned, a fundamental starting point in Western political thought—and especially IR theory—is the "state of nature," commonly characterized by competing visions provided by Hobbes and Rousseau. For example, I develop the argument here that repeated reference to the "Sage Kings" of Chinese antiquity plays a comparable role in classical Chinese political philosophy. It, too, is effectively a thought-experiment. The reference invokes an idealized hypothetical past, allowing for a consideration of basic qualities of humankind, principles of "good" government, and it also establishes a means for assessing competing assumptions about contemporary political behavior in the international arena.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is fairly simple. First, it is to clarify the external applicability of a central concept in Western political thought—the notion of a "state of nature" as described by Thomas Hobbes in Leviathan. From this, we derive implications about the fundamental nature of humankind (i.e., good or bad, selfish or social), as well as the responsibilities individuals have with regard to "good" or "just" government—also commonly referred to as the "social contract." Conversely, government also has responsibilities to the governed in upholding its end of the bargain/contract, else government can be seen as lacking legitimacy. So, within this basic initial conceptualization (the state of nature), lie tremendously powerful assumptions.

Yet more important for IR scholars—more specifically those of a "realist" worldview—the state of nature is often taken to be more explicit. It is
a rough approximation of the condition of "anarchy" that exists between nation states in the international system. Lacking any over-arching sovereign authority, nation-states are said to exist almost literally in a Hobbesian condition of insecurity, war, and lack of productive society. Though this approach has been widely critiqued, the application of Hobbes' state of nature to the international environment of nation-states is a central component in every IR textbook. So this is not merely a philosophical debate, but one that has ready application to how one conceptualizes modern international relations. Is it a continual "state of war"? Do other non-Western cultures share this inherently antagonistic, largely pessimistic worldview?

Second, and to get at this latter question, this volume examines how others from outside the Western canonical/European Enlightenment tradition address the same topic. This chapter looks first to the Chinese philosophical tradition, in no small part because it offers a well-established, written, lengthy, and discrete worldview, pre-dating and originating independently from the Western experience. But also because in an initial reading of various Chinese thinkers, one finds there is a ready application for comparison, in the way reference is made to various "sage kings" of antiquity in the Chinese philosophic discourse. Essentially, I hope to start with an "easy case" of comparison, before eventually moving on to more difficult cross-cultural comparisons. Finally, it should be worthwhile to argue for the greater inclusion of non-Western thinkers in the discourse of political thought, as the world is trending toward a more global marketplace of ideas.

What is the "state of nature"? Let me be absolutely clear here—the state of nature qua Hobbes is a hypothetical precondition, an imagined environment prior to known history, a "before time," that Hobbes uses as an intellectual backdrop merely to ask the question, "Why government?" From this starting point, Hobbesian assumptions—perhaps incorrect and culturally bound assumptions—develop to carry a discordant amount of intellectual weight in the way the state of nature is envisioned, in the way that the resultant social contract is portrayed, and in the depiction of appropriate or acceptable individual (and state) behavior. So in some regard, it is a false debate to speak of man (sic, throughout) in a state of nature, beyond the mere recognition of this as a rhetorical device meant to simplify (allegedly) and illustrate a discourse about "good" government. Yet in recognizing the "state of nature" as a mere rhetorical device, one is able to investigate whether or not similar rhetorical devices are employed in other, cross-cultural philosophical discussions about politics and governance.

In comparing disparate cultural approaches to philosophy and political theory, one can look for similar hypothetical preconditions such as the state of nature. But in addition to this, one is able to gain leverage in a consideration of the resultant assumptive ontological elements of the pre-
condition. In plainer language, this means that just as the Hobbesian state of nature carries assumptions about the fundamental nature of humankind, notions of justice in relations with government, and joint responsibilities between the governed and governing, so do parallel preconditions excavated in other, non-Western philosophic traditions. By looking at believed or hypothetical Chinese preconditions, or by finding similar rhetorical homologue to the Hobbesian thought experiment, one can compare conceptual frames for understanding human behavior, concepts of justice, and notions of “legitimacy” in government. This endeavor—to seriously embrace cross-cultural philosophic comparison—is what is at the heart of the emerging field of Comparative Political Theory (CPT).

HOBSES’ STATE OF NATURE, CRITIQUES, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Why should we have such concern with the “state of nature”? The reasons are plentiful. Not only does this imagined starting point—or hypothetical precondition—give us insight into basic conceptions about human nature, but it serves as a good example of just how socially contingent and insidious apparently “basic” concepts can be (cf., Jahn 2000). For example, the Hobbesian state of nature is renowned for being an environment in which the “natural condition” of mankind is one devoid of security, “without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as every man is enemy to every man” (Leviathan, ch. 13). In such a condition (for Hobbes, at least), “there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (loc. cit.).

From this hypothetical precondition of Hobbes—one which, Rousseau notes, is devoid of family and any sort of emotive or kinship ties, thus emphasizing the overtly hypothetical characteristic of it—we derive several subsidiary conditions. For example, mankind is self-interested and craves security, and from this the inherent “nature” of man is seen as selfish, conflict-prone, or “bad.” Man is solitary. Man exists without society. Man is fearful. In short, there is little good in this environment and all that we—as “civilized” humans take for granted—is absent. How does it come about? Through the social contract with a Leviathan, or king, whose sole responsibility is to provide security in return for obedience. Out of this, order arises and humankind can develop notions of right and
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wrong (for nothing is "unjust" for Hobbes in the state of nature — discussions of justice can only be had after Leviathan guarantees the security that permits stable social relations, become secure enough to become commodious, and society prospers. Thus we say that Hobbes has a negative view of human nature, directly derived from the hypothetical state of nature. Yet simple biological fact informs us that such an existence is impossible — truly, no "man" is an island! From Hobbes, we also get a very limited conception of individual rights (i.e., the right not to be arbitrarily killed), and a rather expansive vision of governmental power for the Leviathan, as a result of self-interested cooperation. All of this comes from the unspoken assumptions built into the thought experiment/fever dream of Hobbes' rendering.

To what extent does Hobbes' vision have any basis in his personal experience? Or rather, what informs his hypothetical worldview? Well, let us turn a constructivist gaze upon the man and his contextual environment. Much has been made about the fact that Hobbes published Leviathan (1651) while in exile during the English Civil War (1642-1651), though it expands upon ideas he had prior to the outbreak of the conflict. Nonetheless, the political crisis surrounding the war provides the environment within which he was prompted to set forth his theory of civil government. It is no accident that Hobbes, an avowed Royalist, favors a powerful monarch or strong central authority as necessary to avoid civil war and political discord. Regardless of his political leanings, he is likely to be informed by the decade of destruction and the toll the war took on Britain (which resulted ultimately, with a Parliamentarian victory and the loss of Charles I's head), and his treatise may be seen as a polemical argument for the defense of the crown (and presumably the head upon which it sits), rather than solely an objective philosophical rendering. Further, we should note that Hobbes was the son of a vicar and was influenced by Anglican and Puritan thought, in particular with regard to his vision of "human nature." It is said that unlike Locke, whose philosophy is dependent on a prior Christian theological position, Hobbes' belief is free of this explicit connection. Yet, it is not a stretch to argue that Hobbes' view of mankind as "fallen" or prone to baseness and evil is imbued with a Christian ethos, needing the redemptive authority of the Leviathan (who embodies both secular and religious authority, as illustrated in the frontispiece of Leviathan).

Finally, it is worth observing that Hobbes was the first to translate Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War directly from ancient Greek into English (1629). This is noteworthy because Thucydides' excerpt of the "Melian Dialogue" forms the basis for the "realist" perspective in contemporary International Relations, which is used to explain why modern nation-states should be fearful and behave "as-if" they exist in an anarchic parallel to Hobbes' state of nature. Modern states should, like the rulers of Melos, worry about depending on allies for their security —
else states run the risk of being defeated, just as Melos was by Athens, when Sparta failed to come to their aid. Thus, in modern IR theory the link to Hobbes is overt and purposeful within the realist worldview, though usually without embracing the hypothetical actuality of Hobbes’ thought experiment. For many IR realists, the “state of nature” is all too real and ever-present. Presuming that one tends not to labor to translate works one fundamentally disagrees with, we can say that Hobbes was predisposed to view the world fearfully, crave strong government, and believe human beings are essentially bad. In this regard, Hobbes was a product of his environment, and his intellectual contributions are, too.

Certainly, even within the Western canon, there are classical critiques of Hobbes and *Leviathan*. John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and David Hume are perhaps three of the most notable for our discussion of the state of nature. Locke, in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, argues that “the state of Nature has a law of Nature to govern it,” and that law is Reason. Reason indicates that we should not harm others, transgression may be punished, and this view is at least partly deduced from a Christian view that we are all the possessions of God and do not own ourselves. So, this vision, too, is at least a bit culturally laden. Rousseau notably argued that Hobbes was artificially imagining socialized persons outside the society that had produced them, and that people were neither good nor bad. Instead, bad habits were the product of civil society, and that natural man is to some degree corrupted by civilization.

David Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), picks up on this artificiality. And while also critical of Rousseau, Hume’s view is that the use of a state of nature construct should not be taken seriously as a statement about human beings, as they are naturally social:

*Tis utterly impossible for men to remain any considerable time in that savage condition, which precedes society; but that his very first state and situation may justify be esteem’d social. This, however, hinders not, but that philosophers may, if they please, extend their reasoning to the supos’d state of nature; provided they allow it to be mere philosophical fiction, which never had, and never cou’d have any reality. (Book III, Part II, Sec. II)

Yet the state of nature problem for IR scholars is that it all too often is taken as having basis in reality because of the allegedly anarchic nature of the international system.

Given this contentious reading of the state of nature—and its concomitant application to an international setting—some modern IR scholars also take issue with Hobbes’ vision, especially as it is applied to nation-states and the modern state system. Hedley Bull (1968) offers perhaps the most comprehensive rebuttal of the absence of a Hobbesian state of nature among states, such that his vision of an “international society” is often taken as synonymous with the British School vision of IR. Bull notes
several ways in which anarchy for states differs than that for individuals. First, for states security concerns do not preclude industry. For Hobbes, lack of security meant lack of industry, because one could not be secure in keeping the fruits of one’s labor; states exist in an uncertain environment, but they can still be productive and industrious. Second, states are not vulnerable in the same way as are individuals. For Hobbes, man was in a state of war of all against all, and even the strongest had to sleep (and were thus vulnerable, even to the weakest). As Bull notes, states do not sleep, become infirm as do individuals, or live in constant fear of death. States rarely “die,” and even if they do experience something akin to this, death for states is not necessarily irrevocable or absolute—thus the degree and type of insecurity differs. Third, states themselves are not all equally vulnerable; there are Great Powers that create a different dynamic, thus creating an international society for shared understanding. While individuals may be closely equal in capabilities such that Hobbes could say that they are all equal in being vulnerable, states do not share this equality. Finally, states enjoy a greater degree of self-sufficiency than individuals, and so again do not have the same type of fear for survival that individuals do. Thus, we can have “a society without government”—yet the spectre of Hobbes still haunts contemporary IR discourse.

Which is to say, when we engage in cross-cultural excavations of the “state of nature,” can we perhaps not also re-envision modes of theorizing for international relations?

So we should probably take the Hobbesian conception of a “state of nature” with more than a small grain of salt—especially when looking for extra-cultural parallels to the concept. Perhaps most notably for engaging the Chinese cannon (where virtue is emphasized and often actively debated), Rousseau’s more positive view of mankind in a “natural state” offers a telling alternative to Hobbes. Though Rousseau is “positive” in the pre-Romantic sense that animals and the natural world are positive; true virtue arises as a product of civil society for Rousseau: human beings tend toward positive social behavior and are innately moral (in their response to witnessing suffering), and are corrupted by private property and other social ills. Nevertheless, what we should take from the preceding discussion of Hobbes and the “state of nature” is a recognition of how tremendously beguiling it has been with regard to Western political theory, visions of the natural disposition of humankind (i.e., bad and fearful), and arguments regarding why we need government (i.e., What is the “social contract”?). Inherent within Hobbes’ vision are basic ontological suppositions that may or may not hold when applied to other cultural systems, or eidos, especially as Hobbes’ suppositions were (and are) actively critiqued within the Western canon.
chapter 6

SAGE KINGS AS A RHETORICAL CHINESE STATE OF NATURE

Is there a similar reference point to the “state of nature” and the resultant “social contract” in Chinese political philosophy? Obviously, I argue yes, else there would be no need for this chapter, and perhaps this book. Is there, as we posed with Hobbes, a hypothetical precondition, or an imagined environment, prior to known history? Is there a “before time” that is used to ask the question, “Why government?” In fact, I assert there is. I did not set out seeking such a touchstone, so was not purposefully trying to impose the notion on an extant body of work. Rather, when first reading translations of Chinese philosophy, one is repeatedly struck by a continual reference to an apparently shared historical understanding of a set of “Sage Kings,” or wise and virtuous rulers from Chinese history. This type of reference recurs despite the philosopher one is reading, at least if one is reading from the set of classical, canonical Chinese philosophical writings from the “hundred philosophers” period (551-233 BC) and before. As such, I initially presumed that the Kings were clearly documented and historically well known. Yet this is not the case.

The established archaeological record in China dates to ca. 1300 BC, yet the period of the original Sage Kings dates to a time fully 900 to 1,000 years prior to this (ca. 2357-2205 BC). For western readers unacquainted with the scale of Chinese historical thought, this is as if philosophers writing 500 years prior to the time of Christ were talking about events more than 1,500 years prior to that (which is still some 900 years before the “modern” archaeological record reaches). Notably, since the original Sage Kings (viz., Yao, Shun, and Yu) that are referenced in Confucian (and later) writings date to a period a full 1,000 (give or take) before the beginning of archaeological evidence, I assert that we may treat this reference as a hypothetical precondition, an imagined or “mythic” environment prior to known history, or a rhetorical “before time.” As such, it is used to pose the question, “Why government?” or “What is good government?” and corresponds as a rhetorical device to the “state of nature” as it is used in the Western philosophical tradition. Accordingly, I assert that we can look at how the Sage Kings are invoked, or used philosophically, in order to discern subsidiary assumptions about the “nature of man” in Chinese thought and the existence of a possible parallel for the “social contract”, just as different European philosophers developed contending visions of the state of nature, nature of man, and obligations under the social contract.

Briefly though, who are the Sage Kings, to the extent that they are treated as “legendary” figures? Understating the particular roles of each is insightful for not just understanding their apocryphal role, but also for their legendary status. The dates used are traditional. For example, Sage King Yao (r. 2297-2257 BC) is the first king, ruling a mere five hundred years after the “culture heroes” of Fu Xi (credited with invent-
ing writing, fishing, and trapping) and Shen Nong (credited with inventing agriculture and commerce). Sage King Shun (r. 2255-2205 BC) follows Yao’s impressive hundred year reign (which would be a remarkable feat in any age or culture), and Shun is notable for having a Minister of Agriculture (viz., Hou Ji, “Lord Millet”) who supposedly becomes the progenitor for the Zhou royal line. Sage King Yu (r. 2205-1766 BC) is the supposed founder of the Xia Dynasty, who is also credited with making north-central China habitable for the Chinese people by taming the floods of the Yellow River. It is only after Sage King Yu that we get the contrapuntal example of the “evil tyrant” or “degenerate terminator” King Jie (r. 1818-1766 BC), whose incompetent rule results in the fall of the Xia dynasty (cf., Slingerland 2003: xxvi-xxvii). Virtuous rulers found dynasties, whereas corrupt, degenerate, or evil leaders result in the termination of dynastic rule. All of this activity occurs before written historical records, and even before the archaeological record (of roughly 1300 BC), which coincides with the Shang Dynasty, traditionally spanning 1751-1122 BC.

To the extent that the Confucian worldview is even addressed in modern political science literature, it is usually within the framework of a discounted “Asian Values” debate on human rights (e.g., communitarianism vs. individualism). Little actual effort has been made, per the CPT approach, to look for equivalencies between Western and Chinese thought. And while this is changing, with the growing interest in CPT (n.b., Dallmayr 2010), a rich philosophical tradition has been largely ignored, overly simplified, or erroneously treated through an Orientalist lens as parochial, quaint, or outdated, and non-generalizable. Given the historical distance of the Sage Kings, the fact that there is no “real” knowledge about them, and since the era ascribed to their rule is effectively a millenia prior to the beginning of the archaeological record, we can treat any reference to them as hypothetical, mythic, or conjectural. For these reasons, I assert that we can view the discussion of the Sage Kings similarly to the Western discussion of a state of nature: as a rhetorical backdrop.

“So what?” a reader may well be prompted to ask. Well, one already sees the inherent dynamic of a state of nature, social contract, virtuous behavior, and preconditions for considering the Chinese conception of “good government.” First, we can treat reference to the Sage Kings as a stylistic device similar to Hobbes’ state of nature, because they are legendary, mythic, and used to illustrate a lesson or desired outcome. The underlying assumptions used to build the rhetorical device differ significantly, however, as does the cultural context. Another way to consider this parallel, or partial equivalence is to ask, “How is the device used?” So I argue for a utilitarian approach to cross-cultural conceptual engagement.
Second, what are the lessons derived from the stories of the Sage Kings? What do they tell us about a Chinese political ethic? The first major departure from the Western perspective is the underlying assumption, at least for many of the Confucian and post-Confucian philosophers, that man is moral and virtuous, and aspires to refine his virtue. Sage Kings are used as exemplars of virtue, toward which rulers should aspire; degenerate rulers result in the termination of stable dynasties, and as such serve as negative examples. While Hobbes views man negatively, as envious and brutish, the dominant strain of Chinese thought is more positive. While Laozi was notably silent on this, the main strand of Confucianist thought is positive. There are exceptions to this tendency, but they are notable precisely because they are exceptions (viz., Xunzi, Han Fei Zi). Additionally, if one asks why Hobbes has such a negative view of humankind—and why this seems to be a dominant perception in Western thought—one begins to recognize that the culturally-specific impact of Christianity and mankind’s “fallen” status within this doctrine weigh heavily on the Hobbesian worldview.

In addition to this primary departure with regard to the fundamental nature of humankind, which is nominally significant—imagine what type of government one needs depending on whether or not you envision rulers and ruled as predominantly virtuous or as predominantly corrupt and in need of redemption—there are other lesson-elements within the Sage King discourse. The mythic discourse emphasizes an idealized history and its reflection of peace, order and social stability. This sense of order is dual: patrilineal and hierarchical within familial lines, and also hierarchical and deferential outside the family grouping. Notable also in the mythic discourse is the lack of political turmoil except that which is created by degenerate rulers. In some ways, rulers that allow turmoil and disorder are by definition degenerate, and are therefore reflecting their unsuitability to rule. Thus, the discourse reemphasizes the importance of political stability, observance of existing rituals as important for maintaining social order, and the underlying desire to emulate the virtuous. As such, this is an especially attractive counterpoint to the Warring States period (ca. 403-221 BC), which runs largely coincident with the “hundred philosophers” period (ca. 551-233 BC). Thus, by looking at a few of the most notable philosophers of the time, we may see how they view order, assumptions about the role of government, “proper” human behavior with regard to governing and being governed (i.e., a “social contract”), as well as the discursive role that reference to the Sage Kings plays. While these references are often interspersed with other historical figures or stories about historically contemporary rulers that are “sage-like,” my main focus is on the “Big Three” Sage Kings of old: Yao, Shun, and Yu.

Kongzi (b. 551?-d. 479 BC), or Confucius, is perhaps the most well-known classical Chinese philosopher. For Kongzi, human nature is good,
and kingly rule is virtuous. Order is obtained by the non-coercive influence of the morally perfected person. This is achieved not through force, governmental regulation, or coercion, but by emulation. Illustrating this relationship in Analects, Book 2, “The Master said, ‘One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars.’” (Slingerland 2003: 8). The point being that the harmony in the natural world (the more literal Chinese state of nature, or natural law referent) is to be the “model for the human ruler, who—in a wu-wei fashion—will bring the world to order silently, inevitably, and unselfconsciously through the power of his perfected moral Virtue” (Slingerland 2003: 8). Note here, too, one sees a very different conceptualization for the notion of individual agency and action, which speaks to the ontological nature of these conceptions.

Wu-wei is a reference to the daoist notion of non-action, literally meaning “non-doing,” which serves as both an individual spiritual ideal and a political ideal for Confucius. While it can be translated as “effortless action,” wu-wei refers not to what is (or is not) being done, but rather the manner in which it is done—spontaneous, unselfconscious and perfectly efficacious. Wu-wei reflects harmony between inner disposition and external movements, as well as a state of harmony between the individual and Heaven, thus reflecting Virtue. In the political realm, for Confucius, wu-wei refers to ruling by means of Virtue, which “is therefore an effortless form of rulership in which the ruler merely makes himself correct and thereby wins the spontaneous fealty of everyone in the world” (Slingerland 2003: 243). People are attracted to virtue.

Thus, mankind is good and desires to be better, political order obtained via moral perfection to the point of effortless (non)action, which inspires emulation, and which is also an outgrowth of filial piety. The harmony of nature is to be a model for the human ruler; nature is conceived as harmonious and balanced, not conflictual and warlike. Conversely, natural disorder (or disaster) reflects lack of attention to rites or lack of a ruler’s virtuous development. Therefore, virtuous rulers come to reflect the “Mandate of Heaven” in accordance with proper ritual practice, moral development and resulting social order and stability. For example:

Duke Jing of Qi questioned Confucius about government. Confucius replied, “Let the ruler be a ruler; the subject a subject; the father, a father; the son, a son.” The duke said, “Splendid! For if indeed the ruler is not a ruler, the subject not a subject, the father not a father, the son not a son, then although there is grain, how will I be able to eat it?” (Book 12, verse 11; in Watson 2007: 82)

Kings of lesser virtue or less attentive to the demands of propriety, ritual, and social order will lose the Mandate of Heaven (presumably because
they are engaging in selfish acts and not properly nurturing their kingdom, by storing food from the harvest in case of famine, preparing levees for the rainy season, keeping social conventions, ensuring maintenance of domestic relations, and the like. By losing the Mandate of Heaven, evil or degenerate kings effectively violate the Confucianist social contract. As Confucius said,

the gentleman has three things he stands in awe of. He stands in awe of the Mandate of Heaven, of persons in high position, and of the words of the sages. The petty man, failing to understand the Mandate of Heaven, does not view it with awe. He treats persons in high positions with disrespect and scorns the words of the sages. (Book 16, Verse 8, in Watson 2007: 116)

From a CPT perspective, we can identify within the Sage King discourse—if the Sage King references are treated as a rhetorical equivalent to the "state of nature"—a subsidiary assumption about the nature of humankind (generally good, tending toward virtue), and a resultant parallel for treating the "Mandate of Heaven" as a Chinese social contract.

Later thinkers also pick up on these Confucianist themes, or engage them from a diverse perspective. For example, Mozi (ca. 400 BC) is an anti-Confucianist who is highly critical of observing ritual for the mere sake of ritual and condemns such mindless social propriety. Mozi also introduces themes of utilitarianism (li, or benefit) in understanding social behavior, yet still uses references to the Sage Kings as a means of understanding good government; "If one wishes to emulate and carry on the ways of Yao, Shun Yu, and Tang, then one must honor the worthy, for honoring the worthy is the foundation of good government" (Watson 2003b: 23). He further emphasizes rulers' need to honor the worthy, noting that "the sage kings of ancient times took great pains to honor the worthy and employ the capable, showing no special consideration for their own kin, no partiality for the eminent and rich, no favoritism for the good-looking and attractive" (Watson 2003b: 23). Furthermore, it is the will of Heaven that righteousness be reflected in rule, for "where there is righteousness there is life; where there is no righteousness there is death. Where there is righteousness there is wealth; where there is no righteousness there is poverty. Where there is righteousness there is order; where there is no righteousness there is disorder. (Watson 2003b: 82). Order is desirable, and in many ways its own reward, as order attracts support and followers.

If we extend the social contract argument—as a subsidiary element of our state of nature discussion—to be roughly equivalent to the Mandate of Heaven, Mozi is also informative as to what this mandate—or "will of Heaven"—entails. For example, Mozi said:

Yu, Tang, Wen, and Wu, the sage kings of the Three Dynasties of antiquity—they were the ones who obeyed the will of Heaven and won
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reward, jie, Zhou, You, and Li, the evil kings of the Three Dynasties of antiquity—they were the ones who disobeyed the will of Heaven and incurred punishment.” (Watson 2003b: 84)

Elaborating on the right versus might debate, “He who obeys the will of Heaven will regard righteousness as right. He who disobeys the will of Heaven will regard force as right.” (Watson 2003b: 85).

This is directly applicable to the ongoing idealist/realist debates within IR, and also a reason why CPT offers tremendous value added as an emerging subfield of political theory, especially to International Relations scholars. Mozi’s interpretation regarding righteousness carries over to the behavior of states and politics. When one regards righteousness as right, “If one is in a large state, he will not attack a small state. If one is a member of a large family, he will not bully a small family. The strong will not oppress the weak; the eminent will not lord it over the humble; the cunning will not deceive the stupid.” (2003b: 85). To be in concordance with the social contract, then, means to observe the proprieties of order and peace, because it is through the observance of this that benefits accrue to “Heaven on high, to the spirits in the middle realm, and to man below.” Conversely, one who regards force as right will attack small states, bully those he can, and lord it over the humble and deceive the stupid. No benefit will accrue to Heaven, the spirits, or to man below, and because none of these three types of benefits are realized, this ruler will be called an evil king. More to the point of a social contract, the people are then justified in abandoning such a ruler.

Mozi’s ethic of good rule extends beyond merely trying to be righteous, as he recognized that there were certain to be unjust rulers in the world. This is a dually important point of departure for Mozi from the Confucianists: instead of being blindly obedient to tradition, Mozi asserts the need for usefulness to be considered and he has a more active vision of the role of government than mere wu-wei effortless action. But still, these recommendations are cast in terms of the sage kings, “Therefore the ancient sage kings issued statutes and published laws, providing rewards and punishments in order to encourage good and prevent evil” (Watson 2003b: 124). Righteous kings should guide and incentivize the general population, not just passively accept the fatalist ritualism proposed by Confucianists.

When faced with the unrighteousness of warfare, Mozi is notable not just for his condemnation of offensive warfare, both in economic and moral terms, but also for his recommendation for collective action and third-party intervention. “Now if only there were someone who would conduct his diplomatic affairs in good faith . . . who, when a large state attacked a small one, would go to the rescue of the small state along with others; who when the walls and fortifications of the smaller state were in poor condition, would see to it that they were repaired” (Watson 2003b:
62-63). In his discussion of offensive warfare, Mozi distinguishes between offensive warfare and appropriate responses to it (again in context of sage kings), noting “if we examine the cases of these three sage kings, we will see that what they did was not to ‘attack’ but to ‘punish’” (Watson 2003b: 61). Speaking to the efficacy of a CPT approach, in addition to our discussion of the state of nature, the social contract, and the inherent qualities of “good” rule, Mozi also offers some insight for those interested in just war doctrine and early conceptions of collective security.

Mengzi (b. 572 BC), or Mencius, also uses the Sage Kings as a reference point for behavior, and is notable for being one of the first to actively assert that “man is by nature good” (Thomas 1927: 12), but merely apt to be corrupted by a corrupt society or unrighteous ruler. In this, he is at least passingly reminiscent of Rousseau. Mengzi also gives us additional insight into the Chinese social contract, extolling the obligations the ruler has to those he rules and actually discussion the satisfaction of the people as a key obligation. Ivanhoe (2009: xiii) observes that Mencius is one of the first thinkers anywhere to assert that rulers and states existed to serve their people, and that the “people are the only tangible indicator of good governance.” Interestingly, those rulers who failed to serve the people lose, according to Mencius, the mandate to rule and can be removed by those more qualified. Despite this insistence on looking to the welfare of the people as an indicator of the mandate to rule, Mencius did not include any discussion of the right of the people to revolt or assert that the people should elect those who govern, merely that other righteous elites that were qualified could remove the corrupt, ineffective rulers. Mengzi is generally seen as the distillation of much of the political thought of the Zhou period, most of which uses an interpretation of the Sage Kings as a reference point for legitimate behavior.

Diverging from the Confucianist world view, there are additionally thinkers who depart (sometimes radically) from the basic vision expounded by Kongzi and his ardent supporter, Mengzi. Two such thinkers are Xunzi (310-220 BC), and his student Han Fei Zi (280-233 BC). Xunzi is still considered a Confucian, but departs in his consideration of human nature. For Xunzi, mankind is not predisposed to be good, but is prone to evil and needs education and moral training. Without such education and training, a king is likely to be degenerate and amoral. In this, Xunzi may be seen as an early social constructivist. Yet even Xunzi still refers to the role of sages as instructive (in multiple ways). Watson (2003c: 5) notes,

the end of this process of education, the proper function of the sage, is to govern. Once he has become not only a sage and teacher, but ruler as well, he may, as Xunzi explains in his chapters on political science, economics and ritual, set about ordering the state on the basis of proper moral principles and insuring peace and prosperity to the world.
Xunzi invokes not just the reigns of the Big Three sage kings Yao, Shun and Yu, but also cites the reign of King Tang of the Shang dynasty and Kings Wen and Wu of the Zhou dynasty as examples of these desired periods of ideal peace and order. This, also, is a departure from earlier writers and how Sage Kings were usually invoked.

The student of Xunzi, Han Fei Zi (280-233 BC), takes Xunzi’s departures even further. Han Fei Zi asserts that man is overtly bad. From this, we can view him as a fallen Confucian, and should also note that it is Han Fei Zi who gave rise to the “Legalist” school of Chinese thought, with its emphasis on power, strength of the state, punishment as an effective tool of kingly rule, and emphasis on shu, or the art of rule. It is of little surprise, then, that Han Fei Zi is tremendously popular with Western realists, and that he is often compared to Machiavelli in this regard. Legalism rejects all appeals to religion and morality, instead couching “good” government in terms of what is best for the ruling class. To the extent that sages of the past are referenced, it is usually derisive or as a way of pointing out the folly of blindly following such examples. For example, Han Fei Zi critiques Confucius and Mozi, noting that “Confucius and Mozi both followed the ways of Yao and Shun, and though their practices differed, each claimed to be following the real Yao and Shun. But since we cannot call Yao and Shun back to life, who is to decide whether it is the Confucians or the Mohists who are telling the truth?” (Watson 2003a: 119-120). Furthermore,

If we cannot even decide which of the present versions of Confucian and Mohist doctrine are the genuine ones, how can we hope to scrutinize the ways of Yao and Shun, who lived three thousand years ago? Obviously, we can be sure of nothing! He who claims to be sure of something for which there is no evidence is a fool, and he who acts on the basis of what cannot be proved is an imposter. Hence it is clear that those who claim to follow the ancient kings and to be able to describe with certainty the ways of Yao and Shun must either be fools or imposters. The learning of fools and imposters, doctrines that are motley and contradictory—such things as these the enlightened ruler will never accept (Watson 3002a: 120)

Yet within this critique, Han Fei Zi remains notable precisely because of his departure from the canonical approach to understanding government that had dominated the preceding hundreds of years.

Thus, Xunzi and Han Fei Zi may be seen as exceptions that prove the Confucian, Mohist, and Mencian rule. At least up to the advent of Legalism, the moral outlook of man is generally seen as good (or fluid for the Daoists). The dominant vision of nature and a “state of nature” is harmonious, and this is evident in repeated reference to the Sage Kings Yao, Shun and Yu. From this, one can derive a rough equivalence for the “social contract” in the conceptualization of the Mandate of Heaven. It is
only during the discordant era of the Warring States period that serious revisions to this vision of a state of nature and resulting social contract arise. In this way, Han Fei Zi and Xunzi also offer a ready parallel to Hobbes (writing during a period of civil war, when his side is losing) and a salve to Western realists who see a self-affirming version of Chinese philosophy as a means of claiming universalism without having to engage the other, dominant Chinese philosophical conceptions of power-seeking as "bad." Yet where social contract theorizing in the West is a product of a negative vision of human kind, the predominant counterpoint in early Chinese thought is largely positive. Despite this significant underlying assumptive difference, we can view the Sage Kings as a parallel to the Western concept of a "state of nature," and note that it is one that calls for very different conceptions of what constitutes good government and desirable individual behavior. Furthermore, the Mandate of Heaven (and its predication on the maintenance of social order) can be viewed as a conversation similar to a "social contract" discussion.

Finally, this is quite suggestive for alternative visions of theorizing for IR, or potentially non-Western visions of anarchy and what this implies for IR. Notably, there is a growing interest in conceptualizing IT beyond the Western traditions (n.b., Tickner and Blaney 2012; Acharyam and Buzan 2007). So, if there is a "Confucianist IR," would it resemble an Hobbesian vision of anarchy? Not likely. Instead, a Confucianist IR would likely posit people and states as more virtuous (however conceived), and tending to support stable social order. Additionally, the role of "action" and agency—at least as embodied in the notion of wen-wei—is also quite different. Here, observance of form, appropriate behavior, and observance of rules and traditions, with an emphasis on avoiding unsettling behavior, leads to very different idea of desired state behavior. Of course, the full explication of what a Confucianist IR would entail is a project beyond the scope of this writing. My main purpose has been mainly to suggest possibilities in the context of how we (write broadly and cross-culturally) envision a state of nature. Especially to the extent that the Hobbesian version, however flawed, is often taken as an all too virtual description of anarchy in the international state system.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that by approaching non-Western philosophical writings with a Comparative Political Thought approach, scholars can engage in productive cross-cultural theorizing. While most discussion of the social contract has been built around the divides within Western thought, it is the intent of this piece to at least provoke and inspire an engagement with philosophical traditions outside of the canonical Western one. There is a wealth of alternative cultural information that can be used to address
the problems facing the modern world. CPT as a research agenda offers a means of supplementing our intellectual tool-chest, and as China is oft cast as a rising "challenger" to the West (as is the Islamic world, writ large), perhaps we are well past due in trying to legitimately understand the fundamental concepts of these alternative philosophical traditions. Furthermore, International Relations scholars are perhaps well suited to face the ontological challenges such an undertaking entails, and CPT appears to be a readily complementary emerging field of study. It is sincerely hoped that this work—both the chapter and the book as a whole—is a step in that direction.

Perhaps in a volume on the state of nature, and more specifically a chapter applying the concept to the Chinese philosophical debates, it is fitting to conclude with a brief selection from the Daoist tradition. More so, as understanding Dao (i.e., "the Way of Nature") is seen as the key to achieving happiness and freedom. Zhuangzi? (ca. 369?-286? BC), in the text of the same name, relates a conversation between the Lord of the River (Pingyi, the god of the Yellow River) and Ruo, the god of the sea:

The Lord of the River began to wag his head and roll his eyes. Peering off in the direction of Ruo, he sighed and said, "The common saying has it, 'He has heard the Way a mere hundred times but he thinks he's better than anyone else.' It applies to me. In the past I heard men belittling the learnings of Confucius and making light of the righteousness of Bo Yi, though I never believed them. Now, however, I have seen your unfathomable vastness. If I hadn't come to your gate, I should have been in danger. I should have forever been laughed at by the masters of the Great Method.

Ruo of the North Sea said, "You can't discuss the ocean with a well frog—he's limited by the space he lives in. You can't discuss ice with a summer insect—he's bound by a single season. You can't discuss the Way with a cramped scholar—he's shackled by his doctrines. Now you have come out beyond your banks and borders and have seen the great sea—so you realize your own pettiness. From now on it will be possible to talk to you about the Great Principle. (Watson 2003d: 97-98)

Let us neither be well frogs, nor summer insects, nor cramped scholars. Rather let us come out beyond our banks and borders, and work on building bridges across disciplines, cultures, and ideological barricades.

NOTES

1. N.b., Anarchy is substantively different than chaos; anarchy does not necessarily mean lack of order.
2. Such that Hobbes, while not a "liberal" thinker in that he has a non-expansive view of individual rights, is oft interpreted as a "proto-liberal" in that he acknowledges some basis for individual rights.
3. It is worth noting that Athens eventually lost the war, in no small part because otherwise neutral city-states viewed Athenian aggression (as exemplified with Melos)
as a threat and supported the Spartan cause. Yet this actual outcome of the Peloponnesian War is often curiously absent from the selective realist reading of just the Melian Dialogue.

4. Interestingly, there is a fairly rich tradition of neo-Platonic and Islamic scholars who echo this theme of civilization being corruptive of the virtuous individual—el Farabi and Ibn Badda come to mind.


6. Notably, the founder of the Shang Dynasty, King Tang (r. 1766-1753 BC), defeated the evil Lie and is occasionally referred to as a “sage king” and virtuous ruler, but he is not on the same plane as the “big three” that I am dealing with here, Sage Kings Yao, Shun, and Yu.

7. There is considerable debate over the actual identity of Zhuangzi as an individual person, or also perhaps as a group of persons. Nonetheless, the Zhuangzi is a notable contribution to the Daoist tradition, and is a worthy place to leave this discussion.

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