Review of Dallmayr and Zhao: Contemporary Chinese Political Thought

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Judging by its contents, *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought* has two, somewhat different goals. On the one hand, it seeks to offer a broad, accessible introduction to the diversity of current Chinese political thinking. On the other hand, it also wants to give readers the opportunity to delve more deeply into some of the contested issues; in this way, the volume aims to display examples of the most innovative current thinking. The result is a somewhat uneven collection that succeeds partially at each goal. There is certainly much to recommend here, as I will explain, and even the volume’s shortcomings are quite stimulating to further reflection. Every reader will be rewarded by an encounter with this book.

It would be possible to write an entire review based upon the multiple ambiguities to be found in each of the four words in the book’s main title of the book. I will exercise some self-restraint, though, and confine myself to a single word. What is the scope of “Chinese”? There are at least four things it could mean: political thought in China; political thought in Chinese language; political thought by Chinese thinkers; and political thought based on Chinese traditions. These categories may but need not overlap. Each offers something of value, but something distinctive. On which version or combination have Dallmayr and ZHAO chosen to focus? In Dallmayr’s Introduction he says that the answer is “in...China” (p. 13), but in reality the answer is, at least to some extent, “all of the above.” The authors of all chapters save the Introduction were born in China, but many now live
and teach abroad. It is a complex question—largely unaddressed in the volume—to what extent there is a coherent discourse of Chinese political thought taking place among the many locations represented here, and furthermore taking place across multiple languages. For that matter, many of the chapters engage at least in part with non-Chinese (by any definition) theorists, and one is mainly concerned with explicating and defending an American scholar’s interpretation of Confucian thought (Peimin Ni’s discussion of Henry Rosemont).

I offer these observations not as criticism of the content of the book but as a comment on a missed opportunity for the editors to reflect on the complex, global phenomenon they set out to capture. Such a perspective would have enhanced the volume’s ability to serve as an overall introduction to contemporary Chinese political thought. In several ways it is admirably suited to such a role. Its first chapter—reprinting the opening pages of Ji Wenshun’s 1992 book Ideological Conflicts in Modern China (Transaction, 1992)—gives a useful survey of Chinese political thinking in the first half of the twentieth century, by way of context for the rest of the collection. In Dallmayr’s Introduction, he correctly notes that current debates in China emerge from three main perspectives (Liberalism, Confucianism, and New Left); Zhou Lian’s chapter usefully complicates this picture by introducing figures who fit poorly into the basic trichotomy, such as Gan Yang, Zhao Tingyang, and devotees of Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt. Chapters by Liu Shuxian and Chen Ming introduce readers to a range of Confucian voices, and He Baogang’s contribution helpfully sketches and then engages with four different models of the relationship between Confucianism and democracy that have found defenders. In a few respects, though, the volume falls short of a stand-alone introduction. First of all, it captures none of the voices of
China’s diverse array of liberals. Dallmayr acknowledges that approaches “that simply replicate customary liberal, libertarian, or neoconservative perspectives” have been marginalized in the book, explaining that Western readers should be “sufficiently familiar with the gist these approaches” (p. 13). There are two problems with this approach. First, for those unfamiliar with contemporary China, the presence and role of liberal thought is rendered invisible. Second, I would dispute whether, in fact, Chinese liberals are simply replicating existing approaches. A century of liberal philosophizing in China has seen a variety of distinctive arguments, emphases, and blind spots that are well worth our attention.¹ Beyond the sidelining of liberalism, another difficulty with the volume’s serving as an introduction is its lack of an overview of New Left thought. This is ironic, because it contains some excellent, focused essays that fit into the New Left rubric. However, a broader sense of that movement’s trajectory—and any mention of a leading figure like Wang Hui—are absent.

I suggested above that a second goal of the volume is to showcase innovative current thinking. In fact, a theme that ties together several of the chapters—and may help to explain the exclusion of liberal voices—is the emergence of distinctively Chinese and contemporary approaches to political thinking. In other writings, co-editor ZHAO Tingyang has argued for the need to “rethink China (chongsi Zhongguo 重思中国),” by which he means both to reflect on China’s traditions and to reinvigorate China as a standpoint from which to think: China as a source of global theorizing.² ZHAO’s own contribution to the volume is certainly an instance of this project. He further develops his criticism of nationalism and internationalism, refining arguments for a global “All-Under-Heaven”

¹ One good resource on contemporary liberalism in China is CCT (Xiao and Bunnin issue)
² See [Zhao 2005].
perspective that he has been defending for several years. It is notable that Zhao has significantly revised his view of the role that human rights should play, now seeing them together with “human obligations” as equally central to a plausibly universal “law of peoples and relations” (pp. 64-5). I take it that this represents the fruits of dialogue with other points of view from both within China and without, an open approach that is crucial if “rethinking China” is to be a universal and philosophical project, rather than simply an expression of cultural nationalism.

This general approach of looking for a distinctive Chinese contribution can be seen in a number of chapters. One example is Zhang Feng’s “Debating the ‘Chinese Theory of International Relations’”; as can be seen from the title, the possibility of a “Chinese” theory is its main topic. The chapter’s concern with IR theory makes it fit somewhat awkwardly in the volume, but its overview of methodological debates in this field and especially Zhang’s criticisms of the “Chinese theory” approach are stimulating and relevant to the other types of “rethinking China” that the volume contains. For example, he charges that in their effort to build a “Chinese” theory, modern theorists too often “rely on conventional wisdom or longstanding stereotypes” of China’s traditions, resulting in the “essentialization of China’s past” (p. 83). Zhang is certainly correct that it is problematic to view traditional Chinese thought as constituted solely by Confucianism; a “deep and critical” historical consciousness is indeed valuable. At the same time, another response to Zhang’s worry is to emphasize that the mere presence of an idea or term in China’s past does not make it normative for contemporary Chinese or anyone else: it can be a provocative point of departure but it needs to be justified in terms that are accessible and assessable by people

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3 Zhao’s article contains some references to earlier presentations of these ideas; for more citations, discussion, and critical engagement, see Chapter Five of [Angle 2012].
today. In this context, some degree of looseness with historical interpretation is less worrisome.

Two of the volume’s strongest essays can also be seen as engaging in reinvigorated thinking from the Chinese perspective, albeit with an emphasis more on China’s socialist experience than on earlier traditions. Cui Zhiyuan’s “China’s Future” draws on a variety of historical and contemporary sources (from Proudhon and Mill to Fei Xiaotong and Roberto Unger) and on current Chinese practices in order to articulate a theory of “petty bourgeois socialism.” Even though it is more concerned with economic than with political theory, the chapter is fascinating and an extremely salutary contrast to the derision usually directed at the notion of a “socialist market economy.” It can be usefully paired with Frank Fang’s “Taking the China Model Seriously.” Fang’s main argument is that democracy may not be necessary, or even the best choice of political system, for many emerging states that hope to be able sustain economic growth. Based on both empirical and theoretical argument, he maintains that China is adopting a “one-party constitutional” arrangement that he also terms “partyocracy,” and that this political model is central to explaining China’s increasing prosperity. Fang is not naïve about the challenges faced by contemporary China, but he says that all political systems have problems and it is not obvious that democracy’s problems are the least bad in all contexts. In addition, he chalks up many of China’s current problems to the “cultural trap” of mutually-reinforcing “antirule psychology” and “weak enforcement rules” (p. 236). While I suspect that there may be considerable truth to Fang’s arguments, I find his recourse to a cultural explanation of the current system’s defects to be unsatisfactory. I have argued elsewhere that China’s “democratic centralist” regime can only succeed—and can only be legitimate even in its own terms—if there is extensive
public discussion of state policies, supported by a robust system of civil rights. The same arguments apply to Fang’s one-party constitutionalism.

I have been roughly dividing the volume’s essays into two groups: those that offer broad overviews and those that make specific arguments. One chapter that straddles this divide is Cí Jiwei’s “The Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution Revisited,” which offers a stimulating diagnosis of the “moral crisis” that Cí believes China is currently suffering. Building on his 1994 book, Cí argues that we can understand the hedonism of contemporary China as a “desublimated” output from the collapse of Maoist utopianism, and that this desublimation has taken place along three parallel (and mutually reinforcing) dimensions: epistemic, moral, and corporeal. In other words, there has been a simultaneous decline in belief in communism, relaxation of state-backed demands for altruism, and replacement of ascetic attitudes with hedonism. One of the key points of the chapter is that in recent years Party leaders have been striving to slow or reverse the desublimation’s epistemic and moral dimensions, while nonetheless promoting and participating in the corporeal aspect. Cí sees efforts to revive or construct memories of Maoist collectivism, whether through media or governmental rhetoric, as emblematic of what labels “partial resublimation.” Cí argues convincingly that such efforts have little chance of actual success and in fact serve to reinforce the dynamics leading to the current moral crisis in which China’s ostensibly legitimizing values are merely paid lip service amidst widespread wealth- and pleasure-seeking. “It would take extraordinary moral

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4 [Angle 2005].
5 The volume contains two two essays that I have not mentioned, WANG Shaoguang’s piece on state effectiveness and CHENG Guangyun’s meditation on Marxist political philosophy. Both are also instances of specific arguments, but since they do not fit easily with the themes of the present review essay, I regret that I will not be able to engage with them here.
6 See [Cí 1994] his earlier formulations of these ideas.
imagination and political ingenuity,” he concludes, “... to steer China out of this crisis toward a new conjunction of values and reality” (p. 183).

The idea that China is mired in a crisis of values is strongly echoed by the Confucian voices that are represented in the volume. The brief summary of Contemporary New Confucianism offered at the end of Liu’s largely historical account is probably too cryptic to be of help to non-initiates, but we get more details about three contemporary mainland Confucians (also referred to, somewhat confusingly, as “Contemporary New Confucians”) in Chen’s “Modernity and Confucian Political Philosophy in a Globalized World.”7 Jiang Qing, Kang Xiaoguang, and Chen Ming himself are all fascinating thinkers, worthy of extended engagement.8 As Chen shows, they have different emphases; without too much distortion, it is possible to say that Jiang is the most explicitly religious of the three; Kang, the most political; and Chen is above all a concerned with Confucianism as “culture.” Or perhaps I should say that Chen is differentiated by being less focused on direct religious or political import, because in fact all three are very concerned with Confucianism’s possible role as a preserver of Chinese culture and “national character” (p. 129). In this, they are all responding to what Ci calls a moral crisis. Chen’s view here is subtle. On the one hand, he is somewhat more of a pluralist than the others and argues that “Confucianism does not emphasize the exclusiveness of cultural identity but stresses unity among all-under-heaven”—very much in keeping with Zhao’s argument. On the other hand, however, Chen continues that in this present world with its “clash of civilizations,” “... it is necessary to

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7 Despite a slightly different title, this essay is virtually identical to [Chen 2009], notwithstanding the lack of any acknowledgement that I could locate.
8 For more substantial discussion, see [Angle 2012] as well as [Fan 2011] and [Jiang 2012].
emphasize the clan- and blood-lineage-based origins of Confucianism, stressing that Confucianism represents the ethos of the Chinese nation” (pp. 123-4).

A thorough critical discussion of Chen’s approach would have to question its linking of a supposedly ancient Confucian tradition with the comparatively recent (about a century old) phenomenon of Chinese nationalism, and perhaps contrast this with the rather multi-cultural and multi-state context of the classical Warring States era in which Confucianism matured. For present purposes, I want instead to ask whether Confucian values are likely to serve as the whole answer to current questions about Chinese values like those raised by C. I think it is possible that a suitably progressive understanding of Confucianism may play a positive role—and not simply further the “resublimation” about which C is concerned—but the very need to fit with or promote China’s “modernization,” whatever exactly that comes to mean, puts Confucianism in a difficult place, as Chen himself recognizes. I suggest that we may want to turn our attention instead to something else playing the leading role.

In a fascinating recent collection of empirical and theoretical essays, Everett Zhang, Arthur Kleinman, and Tu Weiming have endorsed the idea that “governmentality”—that is, a mode of power whereby the state seeks to support citizens in achieving “adequate lives”—is coming to replace a combined concern with state and party “sovereignty” and communist “revolution.” I believe that we see something of the same idea of governmentality in the present volume’s essays by Cui and Fang, in particular. Pursuit of individual and collective well-being need not be mere “hedonism,” as C characterizes it, though he is surely right that imagination and ingenuity are needed to further articulate a robust contemporary political morality in China (and, perhaps, for the world).

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9 See [Zhang et al 2011].
Dallmayr and ZHAO are to be congratulated for having assembled such a thought-provoking set of essays. As I noted at the outset, one way in which the volume can be used is as a partial introduction to contemporary Chinese political thinking. It may be still more valuable, though, for its chapters that grapple in more detail with current Chinese and, in many cases, global political challenges. By collecting in one place the work of scholars located in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, and the United States, and by presenting their scholarship in English, the editors help to enable a still-more-inclusive and global debate about what is distinctive about Chinese political thinking today—and about what we can all learn from these efforts to “rethink China.”

References


