

# The Most Fashionable and the Most Relevant: A Review of Contemporary Chinese Political Philosophy

*Zhou Lian*

There has recently been a spate of interest to know why political philosophy is so fashionable in mainland China. Since the viewpoints of the most influential political philosophers are very different and contradictory, more and more Chinese intellectuals have engaged in a heated debate about whose theory is the most relevant for the current reality and the future of China. Because some realize that political philosophy should be assessed not only in terms of moral desirability, but also with regard to cultural acceptability and socio-economic feasibility, we should not be confused by the kaleidoscopic appearance of contemporary Chinese political philosophy, but rather penetrate into the inner logic of the various different theories and comprehend in which ways they correspond to the reality of China today.

This paper has two aims. The first one is to give a general picture of contemporary Western political philosophy in China in the 21st century. More than one hundred years have gone by since Chinese intellectuals first introduced Western political ideas into China. Although the process was interrupted for nearly 30 years in the middle of the 20th century, due to well-known reasons, the trend of introducing Western thought was resumed in the 1980s. After the Tiananmen Incident, many Chinese scholars began to reflect upon the whole intellectual process of the 20th century. On the one hand, some advocated a gradual and evolutionary approach to change and called for a 'Farewell to Revolution'; by contrast, others chose to go back to studying classical texts.

These two approaches have developed into two distinct issues and horizons.

Among those who have advocated a gradual and evolutionary approach to change, there are two competing positions. Some have agreed to put the goal of national strength and stability above any absolute commitment to the 'rational autonomy' of the individual; they are known as the 'New Left'. On the other hand, those advocating a free market and the limitation of governmental power are called

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'Liberalists'. The two sides have debated on how to keep a balance between issues of equality and economical development. Their members include political scientists, economists, socialists and political philosophers. The present paper will not go into this debate. This is not because it is no longer important or influential in today's China, but rather because many introductory and analytical articles on it have been published in the West since the 1990s.

In comparison with the other group, there is less diversity amongst those who have chosen to go back to classical studies. Most of them are philosophers and humanists. Even though they could all be labeled as conservatives, what they want to conserve and the resources they depend on are very different. The attitudes of some have changed from criticizing Chinese tradition to researching it, especially Confucian texts. Others have resumed the translation of Western classics; among them, the Straussians have been possibly the most popular, the most organized and the best-funded group of the past 10 years in mainland China. A lot of Chinese intellectuals are very confused and anxious about the popularity of Straussians in universities, wondering which 'esoteric' and 'exoteric' reasons are responsible for this. Meanwhile, most of Carl Schmitt's books have been translated into Chinese and have led to heated debate. In this paper I will focus on Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, since both are particularly fashionable in present-day China, as well as being the main theoretical sources of much Chinese criticism of liberalism. Before accepting their ideas, I think that every Chinese political philosopher should ask himself the following questions: Why should we Chinese read these scholars today? Does their conception of politics have any pertinence in Chinese circumstances? Do we have anything to learn from their theories?

The second aim of this paper is to provide an account of what contemporary Chinese political philosophers' unique contributions to political theory might be. I will pay particular attention to two scholars, Gan Yang and Zhao Tingyang. Both are specialized in Western philosophy, without however merely echoing Western ideas or repeating traditional Chinese concepts. They are both committed to the arduous task of transforming Chinese traditional thought, so as to develop original and debate-provoking ideas.

By analyzing these philosophers' ideas and influences, I hope to answer two distinct but interrelated questions: why are they are so popular, and whose ideas are relevant to the context and issues of Chinese political tradition and existing political practices?

## **1. Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt in mainland China**

Stanley Rosen once said: 'A very, very significant circle of Strauss admirers has sprung up in, of all places, China' (Heer, 2003). Fortunate or not, this observation is absolutely correct.

It was in 1985 that Leo Strauss was first introduced into China. Eight years later, his *History of Political Philosophy* was translated into Chinese. However, at that time few Chinese scholars noticed the significance of his thought. This situation did not change until Professor Liu Xiaofeng decided to interpret and popularize it in the year 2000.

Liu is one of the most distinguished scholars in mainland China. He has written more than thirteen books since the end of the 1980s, and has translated and introduced a number of Western philosophers, sociologists and theologians, such as Max Scheler, Leo Strauss, Alexandre Kojève and Carl Schmitt.

In 2000, Professor Liu started the series 'Hermes: Classic & Interpretation'. Since then, more than 100 academic works have been translated into Chinese, most being interpretations of Western classical texts, especially Hellenic writings. Meanwhile, most of Leo Strauss's books, such as *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, On Tyranny* and *Natural Right and History*, have been translated. Some of his disciples' works, like Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* and *Giant and Dwarf*, or Stanley Rosen's *The Mask of Enlightenment* and *The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry*, have also been introduced into China.

The reasons why Liu Xiaofeng and his followers have such a keen interest in Leo Strauss, and have sought to spread his ideas, are very complex. Two literal reasons are perhaps to be found in their essays. First of all, on a theoretical level, they agree with what Leo Strauss called going 'back to the classics', and his claim of being able to understand what classical writers such as Plato said, in just the same way that they understood each other. This implied that most modern scholars had misinterpreted the classics, since they were unable to abandon their own theoretical burdens and *vor-sicht*. Secondly, on a practical level, they are concerned about the consequences of skepticism and nihilism, attributing these to modernity and liberalism. Chinese Straussians seek to reconcile traditional values with the modern world.

As we already know, Straussianism became prominent and influential in US academic circles as a result of the myth that it was the theoretical backbone of the Bush administration's foreign policy and the war in Iraq. This exaggerated belief is precisely what some Chinese Straussians have accepted, since it leads them to believe that, as members of a chosen few who know the truth, they also will be entitled to rule the world someday.

In present-day China, unlike in the United States, being a critic of liberalism or democracy, or both, is not dangerous at all. On the contrary, in so doing the critic gains a reputation of being more thoughtful and profound than vulgar liberals. Liu has a particular aversion to liberalism and democracy, and his literary talent easily impresses eager, young Chinese, attracted as they are by this scholar and his ideas against modernity.

Liu's interpretation of Leo Strauss flows directly from Heinrich Meier. This gives his approach a preference for political theology. In contrast with Liu, another leading Chinese scholar, Gan Yang, who wrote a renowned introduction to the Chinese version of *Natural Right and History*, emphasizes the political implication of Straussians.

Leo Strauss's ideas have strengthened Liu's resolve to seek an absolute standard for moral values, and to criticize liberalism as being the cause of declining social mores and moral nihilism. On the other hand, Carl Schmitt's influence has helped him reject liberal democracy and pursue what he calls 'Great Politics'.

Liu argues that the political context of current-day China is similar to that of post-Bismarck Germany. As a result of radical transformations in society, cases of social inequality abound, leading to heated debates about the liberal economy and social

justice. Here Weberian influences make themselves heard: Chinese scholars are politically immature, and fail to recognize China's economic maturity. Political maturity remains, however, the main priority (Liu, 2006: 123).

As a result of a misunderstanding of the essence of politics, Liu agrees with Schmitt that liberalism considers social welfare and justice as political criteria, thereby confounding the political order and the legal order, and failing to recognize that the former is a question of legitimacy and not legality. In order to justify this point, Liu argues (105–6) that a 'state of warfare' induced Chinese scholar Yan Fu to abandon liberal democracy, while a 'national crisis' led Max Weber to claim that a nation-state's interests and power were paramount. Liu's argument is not valid, since his conclusion does not respect the premises used. Moreover, his claim implies that whatever the circumstances, liberal democracy is impotent, and that a nation-state's interests and power take precedence over any other consideration.

Carl Schmitt suggests that only the Church can constitute the basis of political legitimacy. With the separation of Church and State, political legitimacy was emptied of its essence. Liu concludes that the fundamental problem of modernity is the vacuity of legitimacy, and that the only way to escape this predicament is to adopt Schmitt's distinction, in the political sphere, between 'friend' and 'enemy'. For Liu and Schmitt, politics identifies the essence and existence of a community. Political sovereignty is an existential question, since it concerns the resolution of an existential conflict.

In my opinion, by advancing a theological position, this neo-conservative school of thought intentionally depreciates philosophy. It discards history and experience by emphasizing a transcendental dimension. By adopting an 'either/or' attitude, it seriously compromises itself between two extremes of absolute legitimacy and absolute illegitimacy. This type of 'existential politics' not only lacks the necessary 'abstention of thought' but also includes dangerous connotations in terms of nihilism and political immaturity.

Liu's final words (p. 270) are that 'the appropriate education of legislators is the primary premise of "superior politics"'. This is obviously an echo of what Plato says in *The Republic* and what is stated in classical Confucian texts: that the core of politics is the self-cultivation, ethics and statecraft of rulers (legislators and administrators).

As Mark Lilla (2001: 76) says, anyone who tries to learn from Carl Schmitt 'should be scrupulous in distinguishing liberalism's genuinely philosophical critics from those who practice the politics of theoretical despair'; he or she will learn nothing at all if this elementary distinction is not made. In my opinion, every Chinese scholar should keep these words in mind whenever he begins to read Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss.

## 2. Zhao Tingyang's idea of 'all-under-heaven'

Zhao Tingyang has been widely acknowledged as one of the leading members of the new generation of Chinese philosophers, ever since the publication in 1993 of his second book, *On Possible Life*. Since then he has published seven books, the latest two

being *The World without a World-view* and *The System of All-Under-Heaven* (Tian-Xia, 天下): *A Philosophical Introduction to a World Institution*.

Two main types of methodology have been developed by Zhao over the last 10 years: the so-called 'syn-text' and 'non-stance' analyses. According to him, 'it should not be a surprise that the central focus of philosophical work nowadays is on political or ethical philosophy'. (Zhao Tingyang, 2003: 1) This is because 'there are economic concerns behind contemporary political and ethical issues, and therefore political issues are structurally linked to economic ones. Since cultural issues are closely related to the historical stance of political problems, and perhaps to a deep structure of politics and economics, the historical structure of philosophy thus comes into being: a structure based on politics, economics and culture' (p. 1). Zhao subsequently concludes that contemporary philosophers should seek answers in such reciprocal knowledge structures. As a matter of fact, the concept 'reciprocal knowledge' has recently been developed in one European epistemological movement. Without knowing the term beforehand, Zhao created, almost at the same time, a term similar to 'reciprocal knowledge'. He names it 'syn-text', which means that 'given encyclopedic knowledge about any one thing, there needs to be mutual rewriting of various knowledge systems by some kind of method, so that we can, first of all, structurally change those knowledge systems and then, secondly, jointly create new knowledge and questions' (p. 2).

The other type of methodology is 'non-stance' analysis. This requires 'the thinker to suspend his own preferences or inclinations when making justifications, thereby seeing, hearing and understanding others' (p. 3). The approach of old philosophy is 'from myself to others'. On the contrary, Zhao's methodology of 'non-stance' analysis is 'from others to myself'. He stresses that the principle of philosophical analysis should be 'from others' or 'from things'. Just as Laozi (老子) summarized more than two thousand years ago: 'a man can only be understood in terms of his interests, a village can only be understood in terms of its situation, a state can only be understood from the point of view of a state, and all-under-heaven can only be understood from the perspective of all-under-heaven' (p. 4). Although one may doubt the possibility of such pure 'non-stance' analysis, this 'see X from X' principle could be very helpful for us to understand the world from its own perspective and for its own sake.

In my opinion, two of Zhao's ideas deserve to be highlighted: 'All-under-heaven as a world institution', and the 'Chinese representation of philosophy'.

Let us start with the latter. The phrase 'the Chinese representation of philosophy' should be understood in the light of two aspects: one being 'the representation of philosophy' in general, and the other the 'Chinese representation of philosophy' in particular. Zhao does not deal with the former ad hoc in his book, but we can ascertain his basic attitude to this question; i.e., trying his best to use ordinary language instead of theoretical terms. I interpret it as meaning 'let philosophy speak in ordinary language', in which many will recognize the influence of Wittgenstein. For Zhao, the 'Chinese representation of philosophy' could be interpreted as 'letting philosophy speak in Chinese'. This is in fact the main point that Zhao argues in his book.

Zhao says that for a long time Chinese-Western comparative cultural studies have used a unilateral approach based only on Western standards. In other words,

Chinese culture has been only the interpreted not the interpreter. Therefore, according to Zhao, every Chinese philosopher should ask the question of whether or not Chinese philosophy can be a part of world philosophy. To put it concretely, could Chinese philosophy be not only the object of study for Westerners but also living words contributing to world philosophy as a whole? (159–64)

In order to answer this question in a positive manner, Zhao thinks that great efforts must be made in two fields: one is to make some traditional Chinese concepts a part of the system of world thought, and the other is to make some particular Chinese questions a part of the system of world issues. He claims that only when some key traditional Chinese concepts become universalized will Chinese philosophy be a tool and basis of universal thought; and only when philosophy is voiced also in Chinese can it, and the world itself, be represented differently. Furthermore, Zhao points out that there will be three key themes in the future of philosophy: 1) the theory of communication and cooperation; 2) philosophy of the mind; and 3) the relationship between rights and obligations. Chinese philosophy should contribute to resolving these problems. (178–9)

If Zhao's intention is to answer the question of how Chinese philosophy can contribute to world philosophy by means of 'the Chinese representation of philosophy', then *All-under-heaven as a world institution* is his practical and direct response to this question.

*All-under-heaven as a world institution* was the title of his presentation at the international conferences 'Universal Knowledge and Reciprocal Knowledge' (Goa, India, November 2002) and 'Empire and Peace' (Paris, France, February 2003).

Beginning with the amazing statement 'Our supposed world is still a non-world', Zhao argues that 'the world we have now is one of geographical oneness rather than political oneness . . . for there is no coherent world society under a universally-accepted world institution' (p. 7). In order to organize the global reality into a 'world', a world institution seems necessary. But, according to Zhao, 'in the Western political framework, the greatest political entity is found to be the "state", which thus confines the Western understanding of political theory to the perspective of the state. Consequently, Western representations of world totality are nothing else but internationalism, the United Nations or globalization, with nothing going beyond the framework of nation-states. Such projects have essential difficulties to attain the oneness of the world, as a result of the limitations of the perspectives of nation-states' (p. 12). In accordance with the principle of non-stance analysis, it is obvious that seeing the world from the perspective of the world as a whole is not the same thing as seeing it from the angle of just one individual part. Western philosophy lacks a world-view from the angle of the world as a whole; its standpoint is that of state ideology. Furthermore, it lacks a global concept of the world, despite the scientific concept it has. In contrast, argues Zhao, the traditional Chinese notion 'all-under-heaven' is just such a global concept of the world. In his opinion, the term 'all-under-heaven' is essential for any possible comprehension of the Chinese perception of the world, society, institutions and polity (9–10).

By analyzing such traditional Chinese concepts as 'all-inclusiveness', or 'nothing excluded' (无外, and 'rite' (礼), Zhao argues that Chinese philosophy's main contribution to political theory could be the notion of 'all-under-heaven'.

Zhao further developed the theory, publishing a revised version of it in 2005, under the title *The System of All-Under-Heaven: A Philosophical Introduction to a World Institution*. In my opinion, the central idea of this book is 'all-under-heaven as an empire and a world institution'; the only difference being that Zhao replaces the methodology of 'non-stance' analysis with two distinct but interrelated types of methodology: 'methodological holism' and 'the principle of consistency and transference between different political systems'. According to Zhao, the main difference between Chinese philosophy and that of Western countries is one of methodology when it comes to understanding political institutions (Zhao, 2005: 23).

These two types of methodology play different roles in the revised version of 'all-under-heaven'. By introducing the idea of 'methodological holism', Zhao rejects liberal 'methodological individualism' and claims that in order to see the world from the perspective of the world as a whole, it is necessary to start from the biggest political unit, the world itself or 'all-under-heaven'. He argues that instead of 'justifying the state', the central project of political philosophy should be 'justifying the world'. The state is thus replaced with the world as the legitimate starting point (p. 135). This is an extremely judicious analysis. However, although one may agree that 'seeing the world from the perspective of the world as a whole' and 'methodological holism' are altogether desirable objectives, it remains to be seen whether or not they are feasible.

In order to answer this question, 'the principle of consistency and transference between different political systems' needs to be introduced. The meaning of this methodology is that '[g]iven any political institution . . . it must be able to be generalized on all levels, that is, applied to any political unit, and transferred across different levels in any political system. Otherwise, it is theoretically incomplete' (p. 141). In terms of this methodology, one should not only 'see X from X' (for example, a family from the perspective of a family, a village from that of a village, a state from that of a state, and all-under-heaven from the viewpoint of all-under-heaven); the structure of political institutions across family, village, state and all-under-heaven should also have a strict logical isomorphism and be easily transferable. Thus, by introducing this methodology, starting from the family as a premise, one arrives at the most important of all institutions, 'all-under-heaven'.

There is no doubt that Zhao's methodology is totally different from modern approaches. *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are sociological categories introduced by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies for two normal types of human association. However, according to Zhao, the essence of the political sphere is not only to organize and arrange a *Gesellschaft*, but also to live a good life in a *Gemeinschaft*. Since the family is the most desirable basic ethical and political institution, it should serve as a model for supreme political institutions as a whole.

It is unfair to assert that Zhao has completely neglected the acknowledged categorical distinction made by Tönnies, since he considers that the idea 'all-under-heaven', in contrast with the Western concept of empire, is closely related to the supposedly universal eidos of an empire. In other words, all-under-heaven is a concept which refers to the ideal of an empire: it is more related to the eidos rather than the historical status of empires. Basically speaking, it is merely a utopia (Zhao, 2005: 40).

While the topics explored by Zhao are radical and fresh, as compared to 'old' philosophy, I do not think that he has found adequate conceptual schemes and

methodology to deal with them. However, their theoretical charm is still altogether fascinating.

### 3. Gan Yang's 'integration of three traditions'

A number of facets characterize the academic career of Gan Yang. He has changed his standpoints at least three times since the 1980s. First of all, according to his own words, he was a liberal. It was he who first introduced into China Isaiah Berlin's famous essay *Two Conceptions of Liberty*. It had a wide impact on Chinese intellectuals, but unexpectedly led to a rejection of democracy in the name of liberalism, and of the French Revolution in favor of the English Revolution. Then, at the end of the 1990s, Gan wrote another essay, *A Critique of Chinese Conservatism in the 1990s* (the more impressive Chinese title is *Liberalism: For Autocrats or for the People?*). By that time he was already known as one of the most important leaders of the New Left, a label he never truly accepted, preferring the term Liberal Left. And then, in 2002, he wrote a very long introduction to the Chinese version of Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, since which he has been regarded by most Chinese scholars as a conservative. Once again, I doubt that he would accept such a label.

Gan Yang's very complex and interesting academic background is not the reason for discussing him in this paper. Despite their differences and similarities, the terms 'Liberal', 'Liberal Left' and 'Conservative' are not so unique. A more interesting idea recently developed by Gan is the so-called 'integration of three traditions' (通三統), according to which, in order to show the strength of Chinese political power and maintain the accomplishments so far obtained by economical transformation, we should combine old Chinese traditions (Confucian ones in particular), and the traditions of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping respectively.

Gan first coined this unique phrase in a newspaper interview at the end of 2004. He came back to it in a public lecture in Tsinghua University in 2005. According to Gan, the main ideas of Deng's tradition were the market economy, and notions of liberty and rights. Mao's was based on quality and social justice, whereas deep-rooted cultural values and ideals were the core of Confucian tradition. Gan thereby coincides with the ideas of Daniel Bell, in that modern society is made up of different and contradictory factors, with no single factor ever having supremacy over the others. Consequently, in order for a better running of modern society, one should not use only one theory or model, but rather depend on a variety of different models. Bell said that he is economically socialist, politically liberal and culturally conservative. Gan follows Bell's idea and ranks his own order of values: he is first of all socialist, secondly conservative, and then liberal. In other words, Gan suggests that only by insisting upon the tradition of socialism and classical culture can China develop liberalism.

Gan has recently written a new paper, *The Chinese Way: Thirty Years and Sixty Years* (2007), the core ideas of which are similar to the above-mentioned 'integration of three traditions'. In this essay he advances the new term 'Confucian Socialist Republic' (儒家社会主义共和国) to interpret the meaning of the 'People's Republic of China'. On the one hand, Gan claims that 'China' refers to Chinese culture. Since the main com-



ponents of this are Confucianism and other factors such as Taoism and Buddhism, 'China' is the equivalent of, and could be replaced by, the term 'Confucian'. On the other hand, 'People's Republic' means that it is not a republic of capital interests but one of workers, peasants and other laborers: a 'Socialist Republic' (Gan, 2007: 5).

Gan claims that a 'New Consensus of Reform' should be based upon the acceptance of the legitimacy of the three traditions. First of all, China's official policy of 'Social Harmony' is deeply rooted in Confucian tradition, which fundamentally differs from 'Class Struggle'. Secondly, the purpose of 'Social Harmony' is to pursue 'Common Wealth', which was the core aim of Mao's tradition. Thirdly, this purpose cannot be attained without the market economy. Gan admits that there are continuing and essential tensions between these three traditions. However, in order to maintain the unique character of 'The Chinese Way', this 'New Consensus of Reform' must necessarily comprise of all of these three traditions (Gan, 2007: 5).

It is difficult to find any strong arguments to support Gan's views. For example, he quotes Susan Shirley's idea that Mao actually created better conditions for later transformation by destroying centralized control. However, there is a difference between doing so intentionally and mere destruction. It is unacceptable to confuse causal and diachronic relations.

Shadia B. Drury (on line) points out that Strauss 'believed that intellectuals have an important role to play in politics. It was not prudent for them to rule directly because the masses are inclined to distrust them; but they should certainly not pass up the opportunity to whisper in the ears of the powerful.' In my opinion, the idea of 'integrating three traditions' shows that Gan Yang is precisely trying to whisper in the ears of the powerful, although his exegesis looks as if it is 'exoteric' and not 'esoteric'.

#### 4. Conclusion

John Rawls (2001: 4) specifies four roles for political philosophy. For the fourth one he says: 'We view political philosophy as realistically utopian: that is, as probing the limits of practicable political possibility.' In my opinion, it is realistic because political philosophy should maintain its cultural acceptability and socio-economic feasibility; but also utopian, since its purpose should be morally desirable. Finding a balance between these two dimensions requires practical wisdom. As Aristotle writes, to avoid becoming impractical political thinkers, we should consider 'what sort of government must be most in accordance with our aspirations, if there is no external impediment'; but we must also consider 'what kind of government is adapted to particular states'. (*Politics* IV.1) In other words, although it is necessary 'to know the form of government which is best suited to states in general' it is also essential 'to say how a state may be constituted in any given conditions'. Most important of all, it is necessary to know 'not only what form of government is best, but also what is possible'. Since 'the best is often unattainable', the true legislator 'ought to be acquainted also with what is best relative to circumstances'.

The most important thing is to identify conditions in current-day China, providing that we begin by studying Chinese political philosophy. No progress can be

expected until most Chinese scholars reach some kind of consensus on this point. Besides that, in the current context, the second worst thing is to regard what is most fashionable as also being the most desirable; the worst thing is to equate the most fashionable with the most relevant.

Zhou Lian  
Renmin University, Beijing

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