

ON DEPAROCHIALIZING DEMOCRACY: CHINA, THE WEST, AND “DEMOCRACY
TO COME”

by

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Abstract

With the spread of democratic struggles from Europe and America to other parts of the globe in the past several centuries, some scholars have set out to transcend the Western-centrism of political theory as a discipline and of democratic theory as a subfield. The term “deparochializing” is sometimes used to characterize this effort. Relevant and ongoing debates turn on two salient questions: What does the practice of deparochializing political theory entail? How do insights from comparative political theory inform our approach to democracy? I explore these questions in the context of contemporary democratic struggles in China and through scrutinizing cross-cultural interactions between “Western” and “Chinese” political traditions of thought and practice past and present. I argue that the practice of theorizing “democracy” must focus on understanding, criticizing and re-interpreting the idioms and practices in Chinese politics to prepare the way for democrats to come, as opposed to a focus on institutional arrangements as criteria of evaluation. Second, democratic theory must transcend its prevailing Western-centric and empiricist-scientific conception for it to be relevant and valuable to differently situated and practical democratic problems.

Lay Summary

The Chinese Communist Party suppresses democratic struggles in China with the pretext that the political ideals they strive for, such as rule of law and freedom of press, are “Western” ideas and institutions that are incompatible with and even hostile to China. To refute this claim, I reveal the politics in identifying and comparing what is supposedly “Western” and “Chinese.” Instead of rejecting democracy because of its being a “Western” idea, I argue for a cross-cultural perspective that brings political theory, which has so far focused on European and American political thinkers, texts, and contexts, in mutual understanding and dialogue with Chinese politics and political traditions. My thesis clarifies what a cross-cultural perspective might look like and applies the insights gained from this perspective to the democratic struggles in China.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Kun Li.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Lay Summary	iv
Preface	v
Table of Contents	vi
Dedication	vii
1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Politics of Comparison: “Chinese” and “Western”	6
3. Comparative Political Theory: Critical Reflexivity, Understanding, and Change.....	12
4. Talking about Democracy: “Chinese” Understanding and “Democracy to Come”	32
4.1 China and Democracy.....	32
4.2 Democracy to Come: Here and Now	48
5. Conclusion.....	53
Bibliography.....	62

To my family

1. Introduction

The struggle for democracy has spread from Europe and America to other parts of the globe in the past several centuries. Yet, as Fred Dallmayr observes, there was barely any qualitative change regarding the meaning of “democracy” throughout the “waves of democratization” of the 19th and 20th century depicted by Samuel Huntington; instead, they spatially or quantitatively extended the reach of the American version of “liberal” or libertarian democracy.¹ The global extension of a static and parochial meaning of democracy reflects the entrenchment of Euro-American dominance over the thinking and practice of democracy. As Leigh Jenco points out, recent philosophical debates have typically identified political and social knowledge about how to live a collective life of peace, prosperity and morality with “principles and practices that underlie modern liberal democracy,” which are taken to be “universal” with respect to either their applicability or justification.² This universalism is then supported by “claims about how we come to actually possess the knowledge that supports specific (i.e., liberal) forms of political organization over others.”³ Thus, we end up with uniform “democratizations” that aim to transplant Western institutions into non-Western countries, the worst of which are carried out in an imperialistic form of “messianic interventionism” that waged “merciful wars” and dropped “humanitarian bombs.”⁴

This injustice calls for a critique towards the discipline of political theory. The meaning of “democracy” must be reimagined in ways that reflect and center on non-Western understandings and experiences. Moreover, the supposedly “global” discipline of political

¹ Fred Dallmayr, *Democracy to Come: Politics as Relational Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190670979.001.0001>.

² Leigh Jenco, *Changing Referents: Learning Across Space and Time in China and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190263812.001.0001>.

³ Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 48.

⁴ Dallmayr, 55.

theory must gain self-reflexivity over its ethnocentric blind spots by opening itself to texts, histories, and questions sited elsewhere in the world.

Several scholars have set out to transcend the Western-centrism both in the discipline of political theory at large and in the field of democratic theory specifically. This effort is referred to by some using the term “deparochializing” and it has often been carried out within the field of “comparative political theory.”⁵ The formal emergence of this nascent field is commonly traced to the works of Roxanne Euben and Fred Dallmayr.⁶ That said, earlier works of political theory had already studied historically marginalized thinkers, texts, and traditions of thought and practice to destabilize reified and power-laden categories such as “the West” and “the East,” years before the first published use of the term “comparative political theory” in 1997.⁷ Still, because of the predominant disciplinary focus of political theory on Euro-American sources, sites and questions, political theory trails behind, hence could substantially benefit from, efforts made in other disciplines and fields, such as literary studies and subaltern studies, to engage political practice, ideas, and thought in “non-Western” traditions and societies.⁸ In this regard, Edward Said’s work, although grounded in

⁵ For instance, Melissa S. Williams, “Deparochializing Democratic Theory,” in *Deparochializing Political Theory*, ed. Melissa S. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 201–29, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1017/9781108635042.009>. As pointed out by Murad Idris, when referring to the field in this stylised expression, we should continue to problematize the marker “comparative” lest that it naturalizes the correspondence of “comparative” with “non-Western.” See Murad Idris, “Political Theory and the Politics of Comparison,” *Political Theory*, (July 26, 2016): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591716659812>. Additionally, to the extent that “[t]heory takes shape by advancing claims about comparative similarity that name (and by naming, unite) a series of heretofore specific and unconnected circumstances as iterations of some larger, more general phenomenon or activity,” political theory itself “traffic[s] in claims to equivalence.” See Leigh Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 19-20. Like the distinction between West/non-West, use of the adjective “comparative” should interrupt, as opposed to reify, the boundaries of the categories under comparison, and reveal the historicity and politics of its current delineation. See Farah Godrej, “Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other,” *Polity* 41, no. 2 (July 28, 2009): 135–65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40213498>.

⁶ Melissa S. Williams, “Introduction: The Practice of Deparochializing Political Theory,” in *Deparochializing Political Theory*, ed. Melissa S. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1017/9781108635042.002>; Diego von Vacano, “The Scope of Comparative Political Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 18, no. 1 (May 11, 2015): 466-467, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-071113-044647>.

⁷ Idris, 6-7.

⁸ Godrej, 136.; Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 24-25.

literary studies, has had a significant impact on the “comparative turn” of political theory through books like *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*.

Existing literature of comparative political theory is divergent in terms of the methodologies used, thinkers and texts of different non-Western societies and cultures studied, frames of inquiry adopted, and substantive discourses contributed to. Yet, it shares the overarching goal of expanding, interrupting, displacing, and/or transforming the terms of knowledge production implicated by colonial, economic, and political power. “Comparison,” in this sense, should be understood as “an *act* and an *artifact* of political theorizing.”⁹ That is, the ideas, categories, and distinctions of comparison, and comparison itself, are discursive artifacts constructed and implicated in relations of power in the present and in history, with their own genealogies and framings of difference. The act of comparison, in turn, operates within and on the configurations of power relations.

In this spirit and joining the broader call of deparochializing democratic theory, I focus my attention on the politics of a comparison constructed by elites within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who construe “democracy” as essentially “Western” in order to suppress the imagination of and the struggle for “democracy to come” in China. I contend that the dominant theories of democracy that circulate globally are deeply rooted in Western perspectives and histories, which pay insufficient attention to contexts like China with their distinctive histories and struggles. This, however, does not mean that they are or could be of no use to democratic struggles in China, which is an ill-advised conclusion that falls in line with the rhetoric and interests of the CCP.

Drawing on Jacques Derrida and Fred Dallmayr, I argue that we should think about and work toward “democracy to come” in China. This means two things: first, the practice of theorizing “democracy” must focus on understanding, criticizing and re-interpreting the

⁹ Idris, 5. Original italics.

idioms and practices in Chinese politics to prepare the way for democrats to come, as opposed to a focus on institutional arrangements as criteria of evaluation. Second, democratic theory must transcend its prevailing Western-centric and empiricist-scientific conception for it to be relevant and valuable to differently situated and practical democratic problems. I argue that an understanding of democracy as a potentiality, as a constant and continuous struggle towards relational equality, does not neglect or dismiss democratic practices and subjectivities unnamed and/or yet to come.

I will establish my argument in three sections. In the first section, I offer a brief description of the contemporary political, historical and cultural context of the People's Republic of China, highlighting the party's enforcement of political and ideological control. I focus my attention on how the CCP has compared "Chinese" and "Western" values, institutions, and practices of political significance. By scrutinizing their act of comparison, I hope to demonstrate how the content and boundaries between "Chinese" and "Western" have been effectively determined by the political elites within the CCP in a way that renders them impermeable and rigid, suppressing ongoing debates on and struggles for democracy in China. I recall a recent history of the late 19th and early 20th century, which is effaced in the current dominant discourse, when patriotic intellectuals and political actors embarked on a contentious and turbulent journey of "Western Learning" (*xixue*). I examine their comparison of "Western" and "Chinese" forms of knowledge and knowledge production. Contrasting these two acts of comparison, I hope to reveal the politics at work in each case and to intimate the potential and necessity of criticizing the reification of "Chinese" and "China" with respect to political traditions and practices. I will pick up this issue in the concluding section.

In the second section, I turn to three theorists who either self-identify as comparative political theorists or have contributed substantially to cross-cultural understanding. My aim

here is to clarify what it might mean to deparochialize the Western-centric discipline of political theory and democratic theory, and to indicate how this can advance the cause of democracy in China. I argue that comparative political theory has considerable value for both of these purposes because of its focus on the constitutive relationship of language, lived experiences, and reality, its emphasis on grasping the self-understanding of and meanings for local agents, its quest for self-reflexivity, its attention to local configurations of power, and its efforts at re-energizing non-Western traditions.

In the third section, I focus my attention more closely on the efforts by Chinese democratic theorists to deparochialize the meaning of “democracy.” I begin with a review of the literature on the meaning of democracy and on democratization in what is sometimes called “Confucian-capitalist states.” Then, I respond to Baogang He’s criticism of the problem of “the retreat into theory” evident in Confucian democracy studies and the call for a problem-driven and empirically based institutional approach. Borrowing from Jacques Derrida and Fred Dallmayr, I argue that instead of thinking of a “Confucian democracy” or a “Chinese model,” we should think about and work toward “democracy to come” in China, which is simultaneously a call for democrats to come. To prepare the way for the coming of democracy, I analyse two political and cultural instruments which the CCP has relied on for its authoritarian rule – first, the hierarchical positioning of “the emperor” and “the sage” or “the gentleman” above the “little man” and the practice of moral exemplarity; second, the centric position occupied by essentialist determinations of “China” and “Chinese” in the Sinophone sphere.

2. The Politics of Comparison: “Chinese” and “Western”

Debates and struggles over political reforms and democratic rights have become particularly heated since the suppressed Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and, more recently, since Xi Jinping’s ascent to presidency and the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of China. Of special concern is the way that the authoritarian rule of the CCP has been shored up by an ethnic-nationalist narrative, at the core of which stands a contrast between “Chinese” and “Western.” This narrative disavows calls for democratic supporters, rights, and institutional reforms by sweeping them under the category “Western,” which signifies incompatibility with and hostile destruction of what “being Chinese” means and “what China needs” as determined by the CCP.

With the CCP’s dominant power of censorship, propaganda and state violence, and as it is sutured with “national security and interests,” this narrative prevails in controlled, mainstream political discourses. It also justifies emboldened and far-reaching acts to further limit venues for and freedom of political contestation, while it protects the elite-controlled political instruments of power from democratization. A glimpse of this process is afforded by the widely reported “Document Number Nine,” or “Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere,” which was at first restricted to internal circulation within the CCP in 2013.¹⁰

Accounts of the document emerged online by May 2013, a month into its internal circulation, after party officials at the local bureaucratic units in government and universities were briefed in secret meetings.¹¹ A copy of the document was later obtained and published

¹⁰ For an English translated version, see “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation,” ChinaFile, November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

¹¹ Raymond Li, “Seven Subjects off Limits for Teaching, Chinese Universities Told,” *South China Morning Post*, May 10, 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1234453/seven-subjects-limits-teaching-chinese-universities-told>; “Tilting Backwards,” *The Economist*, June 2013, <https://www.economist.com/analects/2013/06/24/tilting-backwards>.

by *Mingjing* magazine in September 2013.¹² The document enumerates seven “false ideological trends, positions, and activities,” which are “Western Constitutional Democracy,” “universal values,” “civil society,” “Neoliberalism,” “the West’s idea of journalism,” “historical nihilism” (code for historical views that challenge the CCP’s version of history), and “questioning Reform and Opening.”¹³ It calls for alertness and forceful action against the “existential threats” posed by the spread of these ideas and activities to the political, economic and cultural institutions, and the existing “social consensus” in China.

The “social consensus” here refers to “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” “China’s choice of the Socialist road,” “the accepted conclusions on historical events and figures,” and “Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”¹⁴ These terms serve to advance the CCP’s determinations of “pure Chinese” culture and form of governance (that is, a particularly “Chinese” adaptation of “socialism” suitable for “Chinese” conditions), push its interpretations and judgements of so called “political blunders” made in the “exploration” of the “socialist road” (for instance, the Cultural Revolution and Mao’s role in it), and arrogate to itself of the moral duty to restore “China” to its civilizational grandeur as a source of political legitimacy and the ultimate purpose of politics.

The seven “false ideological trends, positions, and activities” are regarded as essentially Western, incompatible with a “pure Chinese” identity and culture, and destructive of what China needs – anyone who hold these beliefs and positions is vilified as belonging to “Western anti-China forces” with malicious ulterior motives.¹⁵ The document avers,

“Dissidents” and people identified with “rights protection” are active. Some of them are working together with Western anti-China forces, echoing each other and relying on each other’s support. This clearly indicates that the contest between infiltration and anti-infiltration efforts in the ideological sphere is as severe as ever, and so long as we persist in CCP leadership and socialism with Chinese characteristics, the position of

¹² "Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation," ChinaFile, November 8, 2013, <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Western anti-China forces to pressure for urgent reform won't change, and they'll continue to point the spearhead of Westernizing, splitting, and "Color Revolutions" at China. In the face of these threats, we must not let down our guard or decrease our vigilance.¹⁶

The document ends with a full-throated call for action, requiring party members to "react swiftly and effectively, and pre-emptively resolve all problems in the ideological sphere" and "allow absolutely no opportunity or outlets for incorrect thinking or viewpoints to spread."¹⁷

Since the circulation of the communiqué, the CCP has tightened up ideological control in, as it were, previously sheltered or tolerated spaces, such as academia, underground family churches, legal communities of rights advocacy, and squashed the already limited political freedoms. The CCP is targeting at political actors struggling for democratic reforms, rule of law, and human rights.¹⁸

Political actors perceived by the CCP as having affinities with "Western" values and pursuits are identified and dealt with using excessive violence and repression designed to exert a chilling effect on others. Harsh punishment has been handed out to critics who violate the gag order on sensitive political topics such as the pro-democracy Tiananmen Square protest on June 4, 1989.¹⁹ In addition to the increasingly brutal political retribution that is expected to follow, critics and activists under Xi's rule face an intimidating burden to justify their attempts to hold the government accountable to the public eye, using the terms and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rui Guo, "China Leadership Critic Xu Zhangrun Sacked One Day after Release, Friends Say," *South China Morning Post*, July 14, 2020, <https://doi.org/https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3093119/china-leadership-critic-xu-zhangrun-sacked-one-day-after>; Amy Gunia, "Prison Sentence for Pastor Shows China Feels Threatened by Spread of Christianity, Experts Say," *Time*, January 2, 2020, <https://time.com/5757591/wang-yi-prison-sentence-china-christianity/>; Nectar Gan, "Trial by Fire: Three Years on from the Crackdown That Put China's Nascent Human Rights Law Movement to the Test," *South China Morning Post*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2154278/trial-fire-three-years-crackdown-put-chinas-nascent>; Eric Cheung, "China Bans Foreign Teaching Materials in Public Schools," CNN, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/08/china/china-schools-foreign-ban-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>.

¹⁹ Xinqi Su, "Wife of Chinese Activist Locked up over June 4 Liquor Labels on a Mission to Ensure He Is Not Forgotten," *South China Morning Post*, September 8, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2163328/mainland-chinese-woman-mission-ensure-husband-locked-2016>.

arguments deemed to be “Western” and “foreign,” and being labelled as “traitors” in public discussion.²⁰ Their dilemmas and struggles are structured by discursive practices that begin with delineating the content of and boundaries between “Chinese” and “Western” in a way that disowns democratic ideals and practices. This narrative is then put into a hegemonic position in public discourses undergirded by a comprehensive system of propaganda, censorship, and state violence that suppresses, vilifies and silences political actors in key areas of civil society.

Yet, this narrative conveniently effaces a recent past dating back to the late 19th to early 20th century when China took a long and arduous journey of “Western Learning” (*Xixue*). The term was first coined in the mid-19th century to describe efforts by reformers to acquire and develop techno-science and social knowledge associated with European nations.²¹ A series of crises in the 19th century, namely the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion, prompted provincial and central leaders as well as patriotic intellectuals to initiate the so-called *Yangwu* or “foreign affairs” movement, one of the first Western Learning efforts, to modernize the Qing state with Western techno-science knowledge and resist against the imminent threat of imperial domination. Later Western Learning movements attempted reforms on political institutions, social structures, and social relations and triggered contentious and reoccurring debates on the content and value of, and the relationships between, Chinese and Western cultures and knowledge.

What is most notable about this history of Western Learning is the creative, strenuous, and continuous efforts at learning and self-transformation, whose effects deeply troubled the presumed genealogies and boundaries of “Western” and “Chinese” culture. The *Yangwu*

²⁰ Mimi Lau and Echo Xie, “Coronavirus: Chinese Writer Hit by Nationalist Backlash over Diary about Wuhan Lockdown,” *South China Morning Post*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3080531/coronavirus-chinese-writer-hit-nationalist-backlash-over-diary>.

²¹ Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 7, 10. One must, however, situate the discourses of Western Learning within both Orientalism and Occidentalism, a point I make in the second section.

movement is a good example. Learning from the West faced intellectual and social difficulties at the time: the conservatives believed that Western knowledge were superficial and unrelated to fundamental classics learning vital to Confucian statecraft.²² In order to include Western forms of technical knowledge, such as mathematics, engineering, and natural science, into the curriculums and examinations of the literati, hence to recognize them as legitimate forms of knowledge, Yangwu reformers espoused the “China as origin” (*Xi xue Zhong yuan*) thesis.²³ Yixin, brother of the Xianfeng emperor and supporter of the “China as origin” thesis, claimed that Western bodies of knowledge contained both technical and fundamental components; in addition, he argued that Western sciences are developed from ancient Chinese precedents, such as *gezhi* or *gewu* practices (literati natural studies).²⁴

Yixin’s argument exemplified the way the “China as origin” thesis identified Western knowledge as a constitutive part of the Chinese scholarly learning (*ru xue*) tradition, thereby incorporating it into “those parameters of intelligibility and analysis that identif[ied] future developments as innovations of, rather than departures from” the existing tradition.²⁵ This was not merely intended to facilitate comprehensibility. They wanted to legitimate political, social and epistemic changes which would result from using Western knowledge to *discipline* existing practices of knowledge production, namely, to “produce something like that same kind of knowledge in the future.”²⁶ In other words, the primary aim of the “China as origin” thesis was to inscribe and hence legitimate Western knowledge as part of the disciplinary resources, namely ancient Chinese heritage, that was deemed to be “ours” and therefore capable of facilitating innovations and transformation to, as opposed to merely supplementing, existing Chinese bodies of knowledge in the present and future.²⁷ By the late

²² *Ibid.*, 72.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72-73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 68, 74-75.

1920s, through succeeding movements of Western Learning, such as *Bianfa*, May Fourth, and New Culture movement, the “traditional,” imperial institutions that had supported the *ru*xue tradition were mostly gone.²⁸

Juxtaposing these two acts of comparison – one by the CCP, the other by the Yangwu reformers, we can see how the content, boundary, and relationship of the two categories, namely “Chinese” and “Western,” have so far been constructed in different ways, under different contexts and with different political purposes. To the extent that these categories have become rigid due to the policing and manipulation by the CCP, we must work to interrupt naturalised and enforced associations by disclosing the politics of comparison; moreover, we must continue to locate resources for democracy and equality both within and outside Sinophone histories and traditions. These efforts are crucial not only to the project of comparative political theory but also to the possibility of democracy in China, not least because claims to “Chinese-ness” is an effective device of power and domination. In the next section, I turn to three theorists whose works center around cross-cultural dialogue and learning for insights on achieving those two objectives.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

3. Comparative Political Theory: Critical Reflexivity, Understanding, and Change

Charles Taylor does not use the term “comparative political theory” in his 1985 article “Understanding and Ethnocentricity.”²⁹ Nonetheless, Taylor’s hermeneutical approach demonstrates that cross-cultural research could be a good opportunity for obtaining self-reflexivity. To make this clear, Taylor first reveals how social scientific theories that strive to be “value-free” and universally applicable often make ethnocentric judgements. In fact, these theories are often based on practices and self-definitions found in “certain parochial Western forms of political culture,” because “explanatory sciences of society are logically and historically dependent on our self-definitions.”³⁰

This is the case because “the languages of social science are developed out of and nourished by the languages of self-definition” of a given society and culture.³¹ For instance, the validity of the claim that politics is a process of negotiation and brokerage of demands from individuals and groups – a familiar understanding in Western liberal democracy – depends on the prevalence of individualist political practices and institutions in a society, which in turn depends on “self-definitions of an individualist kind which have grown in our civilization.”³² These self-definitions are then further “fed by the atomist-instrumentalist theories which bulk so large in modern thought.”³³

This constitutive relationship between self-definitions, scientific theories, and political practices and institutions is in fact an instance of a broader, inextricable relationship

²⁹ Taylor used “cross-cultural theory” instead. See Charles Taylor, “Understanding and Ethnocentricity,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 125, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139173490.005>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 131. Following Elizabeth Anscombe, Taylor also speaks of what he calls “desirability characterizations”: “I come to understand someone when I understand his emotions, his aspirations, what he finds admirable and contemptible in himself and others, what he yearns for, what he loathes, and so on. Being able to formulate this understanding is being able to apply correctly the desirability characterizations which he applies in the way he applies them.” See Taylor, “*Understanding and Ethnocentricity*,” 119.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 131

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

between language and social reality. Practices are constituted and marked as distinct by the conceptual vocabularies we use to describe and distinguish them. At the same time, those descriptions and distinctions would not be meaningful to us – or only intelligible in a sense that they are mere abstract “ideals,” not yet lived out in experience and social relations – if the practices they invoke are non-existent in our culture. For instance, we wouldn’t be able to distinguish bargaining in good or bad faith if the acts and situations involved don’t invoke a certain known practice *for us*, which are formulated using our common vocabularies. Thus, “The language is constitutive of the reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is.”³⁴

Understanding the connection between languages and social realities, we could begin to see how social scientific theories based on experiences and histories of a particular linguistic community could not automatically apply, or indeed even immediately make sense, to agents outside of that community who do not necessarily share those languages and practices. Thus, when social scientific theories based on experiences of Euro-American experiments of democracy were pressed into explaining democratization in non-Western societies, such a practice could ignore the self-understanding, intersubjective meanings and practices of the political actors there, thereby imposing ethnocentric prejudices onto others. In this case, “[w]hat is really going on [in another culture under study] then becomes simply what we can recognize in our own terms; and their self-descriptions are wrong to the extent that they deviate from ours. Transcultural study becomes a field for the exercise of ethnocentric prejudice.”³⁵

For Taylor, an adequate and illuminating account of human action must achieve a discursive understanding of the agents’ self-definitions and actions under *their* descriptions.³⁶

³⁴ Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 25, no. 1 (July 7, 1971): 24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20125928>.

³⁵ Taylor, “*Understanding and Ethnocentricity*,” 124.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 116-118, 124.

In other words, the cross-cultural theory respects agents as subjects and makes sure that it grasps the self-understanding of people who live in another culture, and the meanings of their practices, social relations, and institutions *for them*. However, a staple of political theory is “mak[ing] the agent’s doings clearer than they were to him,” which often involves “challenging what he sees/saw as the normal language of self-description.”³⁷ This critical element is necessary because agents could suffer from “confusion, malinformation, illusion” that will distort their own understandings.³⁸

Consequently, it is the job of political theory to make sense of agents’ self-definitions and actions by “grasping *both* how they see things *and* what is wrong, lacunary, contradictory in this.”³⁹ An example of this is how a Marxist theory is supposed to render “the language of free contract as a sham.”⁴⁰ This leads Taylor to the idea of “a language of perspicuous contrast,” which is “a language in which we could formulate both their way of life and ours as alternative possibilities in relation to some human constants at work in both,” such as “birth, death, marriage, drought, plenty, etc.”⁴¹

Taylor urges social theorists not to bypass the agents’ self-definitions. This means that “we master the agent’s self-description in order to identify our *explananda*.” However, there is no need that “we couch our *explanantia* in the same language.”⁴² Taylor argues that the latter approach “rules out an account which shows them up as wrong, confused or deluded.”⁴³ In other words, it would undermine the element of criticism in political theory. “A language of perspicuous contrast,” however, is meant to both understand others and to offer a basis for critical evaluation. In a cross-cultural study, such a language would represent both *our* and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 118

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 125, 127.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 123.

others' practices and self-definitions without these being exclusively *ours* or *theirs*.⁴⁴ This, Taylor argues, enables criticism on both sets of practices and self-definitions because “it will frequently be the case that we cannot understand another society until we have understood ourselves better as well.”⁴⁵

Taylor’s argument is illustrated by a study of rituals in primitive societies: a language of perspicuous contrast will not understand those rituals “through the disjunction, either proto-technology or expressive activity, but rather as partaking of a mode of activity in which this kind of clear separation and segregation is not yet made.”⁴⁶ In this way, we gain critical reflexivity over an artificial separation made in our scientifically more advanced society – between the pursuit of knowing and controlling nature, seen as the task of science, and the pursuit of being integrated into the world, which, quips Taylor, we now get from “poetry, or music, or flights into the wilderness, or whatever.”⁴⁷

Explicating the relationship between self-definitions, social sciences, and social reality, Taylor warns against the undercurrents of ethnocentrism running beneath “value-free” conceptions of Western social sciences by revealing the societally- and culturally-specific character of knowledge in its production and application. Thus, we see the necessity of examining and expanding our practices and self-definitions when we try to describe and explain puzzles brought by an encounter with other societies and cultures, as we can only start to explain when we have achieved a genuine understanding of others’ intersubjective meanings. Sometimes these will be meanings that are either unknown or that we know very little of. This genuine understanding begins to look attainable only when we try to understand

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

others in their own terms as dignified interlocutors who have something to offer, when we are eager to learn from each other and to see beyond one's own limited horizon and world.

Practitioners of comparative political thought have developed related insights that bear more directly on the comparative study of different traditions of political theorizing, specifically the practical steps and pitfalls involved in understanding and representing political texts of another tradition. Farah Godrej attempts to deal with such questions of cross-cultural understanding. Her "existential hermeneutics" approach puts a premium on existential immersion and practice, on travelling, physically and figuratively, to the social spaces of others. Through elaborating this approach, Godrej launches a concrete investigation into the way one actually obtains insights about others who practice, and hence about texts from, radically different traditions, which is a valuable contribution to the literature of comparative political theory.⁴⁸

Godrej's elaboration of the concept "adherence," the first step in her approach, brings out a few implications of the debate on whether theorists should, to borrow Taylor's phrases again, couch our explanantia exclusively in others' language and a related discussion on the value of "existential immersion" or "travelling." Moreover, Godrej's discussion of the practice of translation and representation presents an opportunity to bring out a topic salient in the literature of comparative political theory: the effects of power relations on the construction, contestation, and interpretation of meanings.

Godrej argues that "the task of a more complex approach" to comparative political theory is a balancing act between the conflicting imperatives of "adherence" and "scholarship" occasioned in the first two "hermeneutic moments" in a cross-cultural encounter. She argues that struggling to reconcile this tension constitutes the third and final hermeneutic moment, which moves us towards a cosmopolitan political thought. That is, a

⁴⁸ Godrej, 137.

critique towards the current practice of political theorizing so that it reflects, includes and renders intelligible non-Western traditions of political thought and practice.⁴⁹

To grasp others' self-understanding and intersubjective meanings, Godrej argues that we need to "travel" to the social space of others. Godrej contrasts "armchair travelers" with anthropologists and ethnographers and suggests that comparative political theorists conduct fieldwork of some kind to better grapple with the conflicting demands of immersive and experiential understanding, on one hand, and "representing" non-Western knowledge in discourses in the West, on the other.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, while Godrej's view of travel is appealing, it is not without some difficulties or limitations if we take it literally. I argue that even with such travel, we won't be able to gain unmediated access to the other's "point of view," and even if we did, we would end up losing the critical perspective.

Godrej names what she calls the first hermeneutic moment "adherence." Like Taylor, she argues that theorists cannot avoid ethnocentrism nor achieve genuine understanding of a non-Western text by resorting to "scientific" or "scholarly" objectivity because of Gadamer's insight that, no matter how hard we try to suspend or eradicate all together our biases, our interpretations will always be mediated by our orientations towards a text.⁵¹ This, however, does not mean that reading texts from unfamiliar traditions should become a game of "spontaneous (if not, indeed, unruly) construction."⁵² To obtain a genuine understanding of a non-Western text necessarily involves adjusting prejudices, understood in Gadamer's usage

⁴⁹ Ibid., 137-138, 158. Godrej's conception of "cosmopolitan political thought" is different from and in significant aspects opposed to the philosophical school named "cosmopolitanism." The latter is "a body of literature within political theory with a particular normative set of claims about structuring our moral commitments and/or our political, legal, or institutional structures." See Godrej, 158.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁵¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, second rev (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, "Understanding," *Theory, Culture & Society* 13, no. 2 (May 1, 1996): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327696013002002>.

as presuppositions and prejudgements from immersion in a language community, that we bring to a text.⁵³

Godrej discusses this issue in terms of “the divergent subjectivities of internal and external reader.”⁵⁴ Although the reader’s linguistic subjectivity is indispensable in understanding a text, her prejudgements are more likely to produce misunderstanding *without* an existential or practical immersion in the tradition and cultural framework of the text that she attempts to understand. “Adherence” aims to address this problem. Godrej cites Gandhi’s view that pure scholarly understanding of a text, without practicing the truths contained in it, is insufficient for interpretation.⁵⁵ Based on Gandhi’s insight, she argues that comparative political theorists must pay attention to “the role of the adherent,” namely the “internal” readers, the followers and members of a tradition, be it religious or political, when trying to understand a text.⁵⁶

For Godrej, the focus on the role of the adherent means “becoming one with the ideas in the text, by reducing any sense of separateness between the knower and the known.”⁵⁷ This is achieved through a *replication* of the adherents’ perspectives and through immersion in their world. That is, the scholar must describe “the adherents’ own self-understanding in relation to the text ... *in terms of* their own language, practices, and ideas,” which requires the scholar to “access ways in which they may be lived out by their adherents.”⁵⁸

To the extent that Godrej uses “adherence” in the sense that theorists should aim to perceive what the insiders *actually* perceive, this may not be achievable nor desirable.⁵⁹ The

⁵³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

⁵⁴ Godrej, 144.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 148. Godrej’s italic.

⁵⁹ Besides the cost of the critical element in political theorizing, Taylor illustrates three serious difficulties with applying the “desirability characterizations” as those whom we try to understand do, or use (highly evaluative) terms in exactly the same way as they do. See Taylor, “*Understanding and Ethnocentricity*,” 119-121.

reading of a text is always mediated by the prejudices in one's historically effected consciousness, which could not be erased back to a *tabula rasa*.⁶⁰ Our historically effected consciousnesses will always be our starting point of understanding, our bonds to the subject that we try to understand, however parochial and prejudicial those starting points may be.

This, however, is no cause for despair. "Adherence" in a sense could mean something similar to what has been argued for by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, which would mean that to understand others, cross-cultural theorists, anthropologists, ethnographers, etc. do not need or pretend to possess "more-than-normal capacities for ego-effacement and fellow-feeling," but are required to grasp the semiotic means, or the symbol systems, by virtue of which the "natives" construe self-identities, social relations, important life situations such as death and loss, social interactions, etc.⁶¹

To understand the semiotic means of a society, one must rely on a "hermeneutical circle" in which we move constantly from "the parts" to "the whole," and vice versa. That is, by "[h]opping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts which actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole which motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another."⁶² Thus, Geertz argues that "[t]he ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive."⁶³ Consequently, we don't necessarily need to be "there" to be "immersive," even if "being there" has advantages.

The emphasis placed on actual travel and immersive experience should also not eclipse the significance of a scholar's academic training and knowledge on her interlocutors'

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

⁶¹ Clifford Geertz, "'From the Native's Point of View': On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28, no. 1 (December 9, 1974): 44-45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3822971>.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 43. For Taylor's more detailed explication of the hermeneutical circle, and a discussion of the logical positivist attempt at breaking out of the hermeneutical circle in a fanatical pursuit of certainty, see Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," 6-10.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30.

positions within society, tradition, and history. Pierre Bourdieu makes a convincing point in this regard. He argues that the social distance and hierarchy between the researcher and her respondent could be partially surmounted by “relations of familiarity,” to which an immersive, praxis-based experience may conduce.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, to situate the scholar in the social space of her interlocutor “is not to effect that ‘projection of oneself into the other’”; rather,

It is to give oneself a *general and genetic comprehension* of who the person is, based on the (theoretical or practical) command of the social conditions of which she [the research participant] is the product: a command of the conditions of existence and the social mechanisms which exert their effects on the whole ensemble of the category to which such a person belongs (that of high-school students, skilled workers, magistrates, etc.) and a command of the conditions, psychological and social, both associated with a particular position and a particular trajectory in social space.⁶⁵

Bourdieu highlights the importance of knowledge to interpretation and criticism in this passage. In short, the knowledge of *local* “conditions of existence” and “social mechanisms” as well as “psychological and social” conditions which generate effects on “a category of people.” This “general and genetic comprehension” is especially important to the task of uncovering the effects of the structure of power relations past and present on the self-understanding, beliefs, and actions of people situated in different positions. These effects may indeed be unknown to the local agents themselves.

Following “adherence,” Godrej discusses the practice of translation and representation in a way shaped by the emphasis placed on the role of immersive experience. Godrej argues that translation and representation of the praxis-based experience in the cross-cultural scholar’s reading of a non-Western text is the necessary means to deparochialize the dominant Euro-American discourses in political science. To “disturb, provoke, and dislocate familiar modes of knowledge through speech and discourse,” the insights gleaned from the

⁶⁴ Bourdieu, 21-22.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22-23, Bourdieu’s italics. The diction of this quote may strike a deterministic connotation, although he does not elide the danger of objectifying others with the researcher’s magisterial analysis. See 27-30.

immersive experiences of adherence must be rendered comprehensible to Western audiences working to understand non-Western texts.⁶⁶ Doing so requires the scholar “‘translat[e]’ the lessons of lived experience into textual, commentative form,” which Godrej names “scholarship.”⁶⁷

In her discussion on translation and representation, Godrej foregrounds the distortion of meaning and understanding resulting from power relations. These may include both internal power relations among the interpreters within the situated community and tradition under study and those between the cross-cultural scholar and her interlocutors. In the scholar’s act of representing cultural others lies the pitfall of constructing, reifying, and reproducing otherness, repeating the colonial mode of knowledge production that Spivak critiques.⁶⁸

Godrej points out that the claim to represent the native Hindu exegete’s world and consciousness “assumes that there are native ‘points of view’ that can accurately be reported and redescribed, native ‘voices’ that can easily be respoken.”⁶⁹ This view leads towards “a dangerous reification of that world,” the assertion that “an authentic essence” exists, which “a definitive experience” could grasp.⁷⁰ With this emphasis, Godrej joins scholars informed by the hermeneutic approach to shed light on the problematized relation between the scholar and her informant, specifically the distortion of understanding produced by the positionality of the scholar as the authoritative and superior knower. In this regard, Taylor raises the example of positivist social scientists who, under the guise of “objectivity” and due to a sense of superiority and inertia bred by ethnocentrism, often “attempt to finesse understanding

⁶⁶ Godrej, 159, 151.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “History,” in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁶⁹ Godrej, 152.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

through a putatively ‘scientific’ identification of the action of the subjects under study, whether this be on the individual or the social level.”⁷¹

The intra-community construction and contestation of meanings and experiences, which operates through situated and structured power relations past and present, presents another challenge to the cross-cultural scholar’s practice of translation and representation. Borrowing from the Indian political theorist Meera Nanda’s “existentially and anthropologically grounded” account of *dharma*, Godrej highlights the dangers inherent in neglecting hegemonic constructions and reappropriations of meanings and practices by actors in power:

Nanda argues that in contrast to neo-Gandhians who interpret the *Gita* as nonviolent and anti-hierarchical, modern-day Hindu nationalists have produced interpretations of Vedic texts such as the *Gita* that emphasize rigid, caste-based hierarchy and violent politics. ... Nanda follows the existential understanding of a lower-caste woman who associates her own dharma with her low station in life, explaining the “uncleaness” of her own caste as the result of past karmic debts, and considering it her *dharma* to be “humble, obedient and discreet.”⁷²

Thus, cross-cultural scholars must be critically attuned to such complex local configurations of power past and present, and the impact of these on production and evaluation of interpretations of ideas and practices. They should also be attentive to how languages and practices are constitutive of local agents’ experience and reality. As cross-cultural scholars enter the social space of the local agents either via a text or field work, they must recognize that translation and representation should be an ongoing, dialogical, and collaborative process. It involves invention and re-creation in which the scholar is but merely one of the participants, and her writing must be checked by the localized knowledge of the “insiders,”

⁷¹ Taylor, “Understanding and Ethnocentricity,” 121.

⁷² Godrej, 154.

by a multiplicity of lived experiences, voices and perspectives, and by constant reflection on her own positionality.⁷³

Deparochialization for Godrej turns on situating marginalized traditions of thought and practice within the dominant, Eurocentric discourses in the West and renders them comprehensible to Western audiences working to interrupt and enrich familiar canons, categories, concepts and practices. For instance, this might involve bringing “the ideas of Gandhi or Confucius to bear on our discussion of freedom or justice, in the same way that we would use Rawls, Marx, or Hobbes.”⁷⁴

Leigh Jenco develops an alternative approach that attempts to move beyond “decentering” Western political theorizing, understood as inserting marginalized voices and experiences into the Western-centric discipline of political theory, thereby revealing it as “parochial” against its inscription as “universal.” Jenco argues that it is necessary to “recenter” political theory around marginalized political traditions, which is achieved by becoming a member of others’ scholarly communities past and present, continuing and reinventing their lines of inquiry and particularised concerns, employing and contributing to their frameworks, methods and “theories,” and obtaining generalizable knowledge claims that bear on globalized conditions of modernity. Ultimately, recentering political theory aims to deparochialize the identity of political theory itself – what we identify, and construct by the act of identifying, as “political” and as “theory.”⁷⁵

Jenco has done extensive work to establish this thesis. In her book *Changing Referents: Learning Across Space and Time in China and the West*, Jenco takes issue with

⁷³ Leonie Sandercock and Giovanni Attili, “Unsettling a Settler Society: Film, Phronesis and Collaborative Planning in Small-Town Canada,” in *Real Social Science: Applied Phronesis*, ed. Bent Flyvbjerg, Sanford Schram, and Todd Landman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 137–66, <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1017/CBO9780511719912.010>.

⁷⁴ Godrej, 160.

⁷⁵ Leigh Jenco, “Recentering Political Theory, Revisited,” in *Deparochializing Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 64, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108635042.004>.

the view that non-Western traditions such as Confucianism have lost their creative value as an inevitable consequence of modernity, meaning that “intellectuals could not engage the Chinese past and its values with their ‘creative faculties,’ that is, as ‘true’ precedents for knowledge; they could engage them only ‘critically,’ that is, as ‘museum pieces’ valuable because they formed parts of the Chinese heritage and not because they possessed inherent value or truth.”⁷⁶ Consequently, intelligible knowledge claims based on non-Western traditions “can only travel to other places and times only through translation into modern, post-Enlightenment idioms.”⁷⁷

To refute this claim, Jenco surveys the Western Learning discourses of the late 19th to early 20th century in China to obtain insights that address this dilemma facing non-Western traditions today. These Western Learning discourses, however, must be situated within “the whole of Chinese-Western relationships.”⁷⁸ First and foremost, this is to say that claims that assert unique or pure “Chinese-ness” are not exclusively derived from how Chinese people understand their unique political and cultural circumstances; rather, these claims have been “‘historically contaminated’ and even constructed by cultural and cross-cultural appropriations” by “the way that the West has understood itself and China.”⁷⁹ Consequently, it could be argued that “to a large extent all elite discourses of anti-traditionalism in modern China ... have been extensively Orientalized.”⁸⁰ That is, these internal Chinese discourses exhibit the influence of Western imperialist images of China and of itself. At the same time, as Xiaomei Chen argues, this claim must be qualified by the effects of “Occidentalism,” which is “a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient

⁷⁶ Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 216.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self-appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others.”⁸¹

Although Chen’s study focuses on Chinese Occidentalism reflected in political and literary expressions in the post-Mao era, looking at the Western Learning discourses through Chen’s perspective enables one to obtain a more balanced and complete view. Jenco’s study of the *bianfa* movement demonstrates this point, from which she draws abundant insights to inform her own conception of deparochializing.

The *bianfa* movement, the literal English translation of which is “institutional reform” or “a changing of ways,” took place after the humiliating military defeat by Japan in 1895, which made clear the inadequacy of the earlier Yangwu movement.⁸² *Bianfa* thinkers thoroughly rejected the instrumentalism of the self-strengthening (*zhiqiang*) policies, which sought to transplant Western military and industrial knowledge onto “a Chinese moral ‘essence’ or ‘structure’ (*ti*).”⁸³ They believed that for China to survive and to truly become militarily strong, modern, and wealthy as Western nations at the time, Chinese social and institutional conditions must be dramatically transformed in the West’s image to enable the production of Western knowledge.⁸⁴ If the “China as origin” thesis aimed to resolve with a historical trope the conceptual difficulties in learning Western knowledge, *bianfa* thinkers sought to solve the practical difficulties by changing the material and social conditions in China to enable the production of Western knowledge.⁸⁵ This amounted to “the total re-alignment of Chinese institutions and ways of life to accord with what they believed to be ‘Western’ models.”⁸⁶

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸² Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 94.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

The work of the bianfa thinkers could easily be understood, as Jenco writes, “in terms of pre-emptive self-colonization”; yet, this point of view would also brush aside the ingenious creativity of those reformers in engaging with “new” and “foreign” discourses, however hegemonic they are.⁸⁷ And it is precisely from this creativity in the Western Learning discourses that Jenco seeks to learn insights about deparochializing the Western-centric discipline of political theory today. Jenco noted that the Western Learning thinkers of different eras were united in a broad agreement on the goal of learning how to produce and innovate Western forms of knowledge in China, instead of obtaining self-reflexivity or mutual intelligibility.⁸⁸ She argues that this goal could be achieved through intervening in and founding “new communities of argument that ensure the production of knowledge in new ways.”⁸⁹

Unlike bianfa and later reformers who advocated for a totalizing transformation of Chinese ways of life from one’s language and familial and social relations to one’s hair and clothing style, Jenco argues that this comprehensive transformation is not necessary and is susceptible to the danger of effacing “the particularity of (typically oppressed) groups and perspectives.”⁹⁰ Instead, she believes that “Western Learning ideas can inform a conditional but nevertheless holistic transformation ... of the smaller communities that form the audiences and producers of particular forms of knowledge.”⁹¹ As the Western Learning thinkers turned to new and Western referents for knowledge production, they acquired “new standards by which one’s utterances are made accountable and intelligible to and within some community”; meanwhile, becoming a new member of this community of argument “changes what that community is and what its members are capable of saying intelligibly.”⁹² This

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

process of learning new knowledge still requires political actions that transform the material and social conditions of knowledge production, although Jenco argues that they should take place on a smaller scale, i.e. within the communities of argument.

Jenco argues that these insights into cross-cultural learning are invaluable to the project of deparochializing political theory, which informed her approach to the Western Learning discourses surveyed in her book. She sought guidance from these thinkers both as *theorists* and *practitioners* of a distinct way of cross-cultural learning to ameliorate the difficulties facing contemporary academic knowledge production, even as the Western Learning thinkers pursued Western knowledge to “correct what they saw as weaknesses and gaps in their own knowledge.”⁹³ Thus, a parallel relationship exists between her cross-cultural engagement and that of the Western Learning thinkers: a relationship characterized “not as a unilateral process of borrowing but as a circular and mutually constitutive one that changes through time.”⁹⁴ This kind of relationship with cultural others possesses an identity-transformative capacity: “We start from where we are, only to find eventually that our thought finds new precedents for action and new resources for understanding itself – indeed, it may no longer be recognizable as ‘our’ thought at all.”⁹⁵

The notion of being “disciplined” by non-Western modes of knowledge production conveys this idea of transformation as well. Being disciplined, for instance, by the Confucian tradition, unlocks its “creative value” as one seeks to critique and extend its discourses, to employ terms, conversations, methods, and standards contested and developed within the tradition, and to have one’s work be evaluated by audiences of the tradition. This series of actions blurs and dissolves the boundaries between self and other. Thus, we could see that Jenco’s approach towards deparochializing relies on the transformative power of cross-

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

cultural learning in a rigorous, scholarly manner, disciplined by the standards and resources of a different tradition. The possibility of doing so hinges precisely on difference, as she suggests that “cultural otherness may be better understood as one of the many kinds of othernesses (such as the historical or idiosyncratic) that make learning of any type possible.”⁹⁶

Jenco situates her approach as a critique of scholars like Godrej and Taylor who advocate an hermeneutic or dialogic approach towards deparochializing. She applauds their efforts which have undoubtedly “enhanced the interpretive richness of our self-reflections” and “mitigate[d] what Fred Dallmayr calls the ‘bland universalism’ accompanying colonialism and first-world capital flows.”⁹⁷ Yet, she argues that “an overemphasis on the constraints of context” in their approaches prohibits the *displacing* of the Western thought categories recognized as Eurocentric.⁹⁸ In short, “constraints” resulted from the dominance of European thought on global knowledge production and from the assumption that individual Western researcher is “rooted in his or her local, Europeanized categories to such an extent that his or her understanding of non-Western ideas is permanently constrained.”⁹⁹

The latter issue, argues Jenco, comes from an understanding of inclusion as primarily targeted at individual, embedded voices or lived experiences which serves effectively “as a marker of ‘cultural’ influence.”¹⁰⁰ She argues that this way of inclusion is employed by scholars like Taylor and Godrej and suggests that it is connected to a more critical understanding of culture that rejects “any singular criteria of cultural membership or content.”¹⁰¹ This rejection is effective at criticizing those who aim to theorise “the essentialized characteristics of a given culture” by raising issues concerning the power to

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

⁹⁷ Jenco, “Recentring Political Theory,” 66, 64.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰⁰ Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 224.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

“claim authority for cultural representation and identity” and “the negotiation of those identities with others.”¹⁰² Yet, Jenco argues that their approach omits “the communally distributed processes that generate meaning” and fails to distinguish those processes from others that constitute subjectivity.¹⁰³ Thus, she asks, “to what extent those intellectual prejudices [from immersion in Europeanized categories] have anything [more] to do with national or ethnic cultures than with training, institutional incentives, expectations, or intellectual resources[?]”¹⁰⁴

What Jenco has in mind is the logic exhibited in the kind of collective, diachronic, and transformative learning that *bianfa* reformers have launched: “practices of politically relevant meaning-making ... find embodiment not merely in culturally situated individuals – or the theorists who, as solitary producers of knowledge, cultivate openness to radical dislocation – but in whole communities of knowledge production.”¹⁰⁵ That is, “the modes and sites of training, constitutive practices, and target audiences of the entire disciplinary enterprise.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, the focus shifts to how we could undertake alternatively-constituted modes of inquiry, as opposed to “how to overcome intersubjective barriers to cultural understanding.”¹⁰⁷

As demonstrated by the works reviewed in this section, comparative political theory has as one of its key contributions the critical disclosure that acts of (cross-cultural) interpretation and understanding are deeply political and normative. That is, comparative

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁰⁴ Jenco, “Recentering Political Theory,” 76.

¹⁰⁵ Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 224. This echoes a central point which Jenco made in her study of culturally situated methods of inquiry in the Chinese Classicism (*jingxue*) tradition. “I am simply pointing out that because most cross-cultural theory sees its task as the inclusion of culturally situated ideas or experiences, it remains unable to recognize modes of scholarly inquiry that exist independently of any one particular subjective viewpoint.” See Leigh Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say?’ A Methods-Centered Approach to Cross-Cultural Engagement.” *The American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (August 7, 2007): 742, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27644482>.

¹⁰⁶ Jenco, “Recentering Political Theory,” 77.

¹⁰⁷ Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say,’” 742.

political theory can help illumine how meanings and practices are constituted, inflected, and rendered intelligible by a language of self-understanding, lived experiences and traditions. Thus, it provides a crucial way for understanding the meaning and significance of politics for political actors in a non-Western society and culture – hence for checking the impulses and power of Western-centric universalist knowledge claims to “democracy” by disclosing the particularities thereof – and for criticizing and re-interpreting non-Western political practices, discourses, and traditions.

It can also shed light on how the underlying social, cultural, political and historical contexts that render meanings and knowledge claims intelligible are inextricably shaped and affected by *local and global* configurations of power past and present. Construing cross-cultural studies in this way foregrounds the situated intra-community and intra-tradition power relations of the interlocutors past and present, and the effects generated by foreign and global influences, such as those of the imperialism and colonialism. Accordingly, it can help to reveal and guard against the distortions and forms of oppression involved in making sense of others and others’ politics.

In this regard, comparative political theory orients analysis of democratic struggles to the sites, contexts, and communities where they are taking place, in a way that acutely attends to the complexity of the construction, appropriation and contention of meanings, and the effects thereof on local actors’ actions and experience of reality. In doing so, it instills respect for the authorial power of local actors, as opposed to a blind submission to the authority of Western or non-Western scholars and political elites who enjoy discursive power. This could prove crucial to the production of insights and criticisms that engage with unequal social relations and undemocratic practices, ideas and institutions in non-Western societies. In addition, to the extent that those insights and criticisms are checked by the knowledge and

experiences of political actors situated in different positions of power, this focus generates a more rigorous and critical evaluation of knowledge claims.

Lastly, deparochializing, the guiding value and practice of comparative political theory, when it is understood as “decentering,” works to expand and interrupt Western understanding of democracy, and ideas that are usually associated with democracy, such as “political legitimacy” and “modernity.” In doing so, it simultaneously contests, blurs, effaces, and displaces the boundaries between “Western” and “Chinese” and displaces essentialized content of those signifiers. When it is understood as “recentering,” it promises great potential for re-energizing traditions and resources that are crucial for nurturing democracy from within.

4. Talking about Democracy: “Chinese” Understanding and “Democracy to Come”

4.1 *China and Democracy*

Democracy has been understood first and foremost as a type of regime in the West. We could see this conception, for instance, in Aristotle’s typology of constitutions where democracy means rule by the free and the poor. Meanwhile, political science and democratic theory in the West have highlighted this view with attempts to define democracy as a form of rule in “objective” and “quantitative” terms. Yet, this understanding has significant limitations and could become severely problematic in a cross-cultural context.

First, I argue that the narrow conception of democracy as a type of regime glosses over important aspects of democratic life which find expressions in “social, psychological, ontological, and (even) theological” terms.¹⁰⁸ Particularly, I am against minimalist, procedural definitions of democracy that bear resemblance to Joseph Schumpeter’s.

Second, I argue that research guided by such an understanding could be skewed towards conceiving or implementing arrangements of formal political institutions, which becomes a crucial, if not the exclusive, criterion for evaluation and judgement. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding and scrutiny of politically-salient practices, norms, relationships, and structures that fall outside of the purview, which may or may not be democratic.

Most importantly, in terms of cross-cultural studies, I argue it is vital that we enrich and expand our understanding of democracy, especially when it comes to understanding political struggles taking place in extremely authoritarian circumstances.¹⁰⁹ My claims here do not mean to suggest that the conception of democracy as a form of rule is unimportant.

¹⁰⁸ Dallmayr, 4.

¹⁰⁹ As Lisa Wedeen writes, “thinking about democratic practices in the absence of a democratic regime enriches our empirical and theoretical understandings of politics more generally.” Lisa Wedeen, “The Politics of Deliberation: Qat Chews as Public Spheres in Yemen,” *Public Culture* 19 (December 1, 2007), 61, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-025>.

Rather, I want to stress the idea that democracy means *unceasing* struggle, and that it takes place both within and outside, with or without, a supposedly democratic regime.

Consequently, we must uncover and continuously realize ways and occasions to be and act like democrats in our relationships with one another.

Joseph Schumpeter, in his widely influential book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, first published in 1942, proposed one such influential definition as an alternative to the “classical doctrine” that defined democracy in existential or ontological terms such as “the will of the people” and “the common good.” To Schumpeter, democracy means “the democratic method” – “that *institutional arrangement* for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”¹¹⁰ This sort of definition of democracy achieved an authoritative status for it provided “the analytical precision and empirical referents that make the concept a useful one.”¹¹¹ In other words, it provided “objectively valid” brute data, i.e., the number of votes cast and the ordered preferences signified. It is a convenient “coincidence” that such an empirical definition falls “in line with the core of the American version of ‘liberal’ (or libertarian) democracy” with its characteristic focus on individual liberty, minimal citizen participation in government and laissez-faire competition of individual and group private interests.¹¹²

Admittedly, Schumpeter’s definition is not universally agreed upon. Different “models” of democracy proliferated since the transformation of political theory from “a discipline anchored in the history of political thought to one that was more focused on contemporary problems and more analytic in style” in the late 1970s and 1980s.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 5th ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 269. My italics.

¹¹¹ Dallmayr, 3.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 3, 25-29.

¹¹³ Mark Warren, “A Problem-Based Approach to Democratic Theory,” *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 1 (2017): 40, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/S0003055416000605>.

Nevertheless, the empiricist-scientific and Euro-American understanding of democracy prevailed, which conceives “democracy” as a structural blueprint of a calibrated alignment of institutions, norms, values, and practices rooted in the Western political thought and experience. According to this view, “democracy” is ascertainable, quantifiable, modellable, and – with an engineerable equilibrium of social, economic and political conditions – readily obtainable.

This conception of democracy is strikingly visible within the literature on democracy and democratization regarding China and East Asia at large. In an article titled “Chinese democracy: The lessons of failure,” American political scientist Andrew Nathan examines the failure of six democratic experiments in mainland China in the 20th century. What Nathan means by “democratic experiments,” however, are two things: “efforts to establish legislatures” on the basis of “open, competitive elections” and “efforts to establish freedoms of speech and organization.”¹¹⁴ Nathan suggests that these two kinds of efforts could be referred to as “the electoral and liberal dimensions of democracy.”¹¹⁵ Nathan’s analysis of the causes of the failure focuses on the damaging impact of nine factors, from “national security problems” to “culture,” on the successful establishment and operation of the democratic institutions mentioned earlier. It is clear that this framework identifies “democracy,” and by extension “democratic struggles,” with the kind of “institutional arrangement” mentioned by Schumpeter and betrays a presupposition of a doctrine of political liberalism rooted in texts and thinkers of European Enlightenment.

We could still see such a conception of democracy at work in more recent literature. At the same time, scholars have become reflexive of and wrestled with the Western-centric character of the discourse, with some proposing Confucianism-inspired models of democracy

¹¹⁴ Andrew J. Nathan, “Chinese Democracy: The Lessons of Failure,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 2, no. 4 (September 1, 1993): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670569308724182>.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

as alternatives to Western liberal democracy and others providing reinterpretations of Confucian political thought to render it compatible with Western liberal democracy. In what follows, I borrow L. H. M. Ling and Chih-yu Shih's categorization of the analytical approaches to democracy and democratization in East Asia to organize and critique the scholarly writings on cross-cultural understanding of democracy.¹¹⁶

Ling and Shih observe four paradigmatic approaches towards "analyses of and prescriptions for democratization" in what are often classified as "Confucian-capitalist states" in East Asia. The first two approaches, "internationalist" and "institutional," together comprise what is called "conversionism." This approach argues that democratization in East Asian societies requires replacement of "local traditions, institutions, practices, and norms" with "liberal capitalist ones." The latter are believed to underpin "the social and political institutions needed for democracy" and provide "political accommodation to capitalist globalization."¹¹⁷

Conversionism is regrettable and dangerous. This approach reveals the fact that the empiricist-scientific and Euro-American conception of democracy is often united with a Western-centric, universalist, and law-like conception of modernity and modernization. Melissa S. Williams's cross-cultural analysis of the theorised connection between modernity and political legitimacy reveals this problem of modernization theory. In many instances, modernization is taken to mean westernization. Modernization is incorrectly understood as a "developmental process that unfolds, more or less naturalistically, according to laws of economic and social development" and it is incorrectly believed that modernization tends inexorably towards European modernity, following "a uniform pattern across cultural or

¹¹⁶ L. H. M. Ling and Chih-yu Shih, "Confucianism with a Liberal Face: The Meaning of Democratic Politics in Postcolonial Taiwan," *The Review of Politics* 60, no. 1 (July 17, 1998): 55–82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1408330>.

¹¹⁷ Ling and Shih, 57–60.

civilizational contexts.” This understanding turns a blind eye to the actual historical arrival of modernity in the non-West, which “has been heavily mediated, when not steered or imposed, by the actions of powerful Western actors from the age of imperialism to the present.”¹¹⁸

Experiences of colonialism and imperialism, in turn, produce effects on the conceptions and workings of political legitimacy in non-Western societies. As Williams points out, “this history of the formation of modernity in non-Western contexts makes it likely that outside the West, the modern state’s claim to legitimacy must be premised on principles that distance the state’s authority from the colonial or imperial forces that generated its power.”¹¹⁹ This, indeed, is an important insight. Democratic movements in China since at least the late 19th century have been situated against the background of the Euro-American colonial and imperial domination. As I have demonstrated earlier, to this date images of “the West” still play an important role in domestic politics within China, which calls for an analysis of the historically-shaped postcolonial logic and language of political legitimation of the CCP’s rule in China.

Important to the politics of democracy in a cross-cultural context, the theorised link between modernity and political legitimacy viewed as “having universal normative as well as empirical validity” is problematic and dangerous.¹²⁰ Yet, in the name of “universal human rights” and “democracy,” imperialistic military projects thinly veiled as messianic interventionism produce mass killings, ethnocentric prejudices, and (re)production of subjugated nations and othered subjects in non-Western countries.

In contrast, the third approach named “Asian-style democracy” rejects the thesis of conversionism and views particularities of East Asian political cultures and regimes, such as

¹¹⁸ Melissa S Williams, “Reasons to Obey: ‘Multiple Modernities’ and Constructions of Political Legitimacy,” in *East Asian Perspectives on Political Legitimacy: Bridging the Empirical-Normative Divide*, ed. Doh Chull Shin, Joseph Chan, and Melissa S Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 26-27, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/9781316466896.003>.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

“patron-client communitarianism, personalism, deference to authority, dominant political parties, and strong interventionist states,” as “a particularly local (Confucian) response to global (democratic) needs.”¹²¹ The conjoining of “Asian-style” with “democracy” implies compatibility between Asian cultures and traditions with “democracy.” However, the term “democracy” in this formulation often presupposes the liberal democracy at the Western centre. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, theorists advocating what is called “New Confucianism” are confident that Confucian political thought contains an “inner inclination for democracy” and Confucian ethics help rectify the “extreme individualism and materialism” in Western liberal democracy. At the same time, “they acknowledge that Western liberal democracy is better than traditional Confucian politics in encouraging individual autonomy and protecting the basic rights of ordinary people.”¹²² Thus, they attempt to “revise traditional Confucian political theory to make it fit within the democratic age.”¹²³ For leading New Confucian theorists Mou Zongsan and Xu Fuguan, this means grounding the institutions of Western liberal democracy in reinterpreted Confucian ideas that express popular sovereignty, rule of virtue and the well-being of the people.¹²⁴

The Asian-style democracy thesis seems to align well with the primary goals of comparative political theory, such as self-reflexivity and mutual learning. It affirms liberal democratic institutions for exhibiting such values as equality, liberty, and human rights and concedes that traditional Confucian politics is problematic and requires change. Yet, what the advocates of this thesis intend to do falls short of a genuine dialogue between Confucian and liberal *political thought* as they seem to believe that the problems concern merely *politics* severed analytically from the former. For instance, according to Xu, Confucianism has

¹²¹ Ling and Shih, 61.

¹²² Yi-Huah Jiang, “Confucian Political Theory in Contemporary China,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (May 11, 2018): 161-162, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041916-020230>.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 163, 161-163.

always put the people above the ruler because their will reflects the will of heaven; therefore, “[t]he problem is that the emperors and kings in Chinese history always denied the ‘subjectivity’ of the people and behaved as if they were the boss of the people.”¹²⁵ It is “[t]o rectify this distortion” that Xu argues we must adopt Western democracy, that is, liberal democratic institutions.¹²⁶ Similarly, Mou maintains the fundamental value of Confucianism as the “constant way,” the timeless and universal truth about human nature, and considers the value of democracy lies in providing “an institution or mechanism to make the pursuit of external accomplishment possible,” which is a constitutive element of a virtuous gentleman.¹²⁷ Their position fails to question the ways in which Confucian ideas and practices have provided justification to authoritarian rule by perhaps overemphasising those which are more malleable to a democratic slant.

Consequently, this approach rings familiar to the conservatives’ proposal of an instrumentalist appropriation of Western knowledge on social and political institutions in the Yangwu movement. That is, a strong and deep moral commitment to the values and teachings of Confucian thought as the fundamental and the structuring (*ti*) and a perception of Western knowledge as offering technical and instrumental (*yong*) values.¹²⁸ This perception effectively prevents any deep-seated transformation of Confucian political thought and militates against the goal of limiting the power of the “emperor.” As I will argue later, authoritarianism that draws on Confucian logic of power would not automatically be removed when Western liberal institutions are established.

The fourth approach that Ling and Shih name “illiberal democracy” has been gaining traction in recent years, with “Confucian political meritocracy” as the most notable theory.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹²⁸ Jenco, *Changing Referents*, 72.

¹²⁹ Ling and Shih, 63.

This approach does not advocate for, to borrow Ling and Shih's phrase, a didactic imposition of Western liberal institutions and practices on to East Asian societies. Nor does it focus analytical efforts on revising traditional Confucian political theory to fit Western liberal institutions. Instead, it views the political order contained within or shaped by Confucian political thought as a self-coherent and normatively valid critique of Western liberal democracy, first and foremost its failures of putting virtuous leaders in power and producing good governance outcomes.¹³⁰ Correspondingly, this approach has led to theorizing adjustments of Western liberal democratic institutions to accommodate and reconcile conflicting demands of Confucianism, such as "elite rule," "benevolent hegemony," and "moral consensus."¹³¹

Daniel Bell, a prominent theorist of political meritocracy who has decades of experience living and teaching in China, evaluates the CCP's regime and rule not as an authoritarian state but as an underdeveloped and flawed version of the ideal political meritocracy. In what he dubs "the China model," the selection of top political leaders is entrusted to a merit-based and elite-based mechanism featuring examination and peer-ratings, reflecting the long history of the Imperial Examination System that he traces back to Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141-87 BCE), while electoral democracy is implemented for selecting leaders only at the local levels.¹³² With supplementations and improvements here and there, "the China model" could evolve into a fully-fledged political meritocracy which, according to

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 63-66.

¹³¹ Ling and Shih, 164. It should be noted here that some Confucian scholars like Jiang Qing have argued for a complete rejection of democracy and for a Confucian constitutional order built on the political legitimacy of "the kingly way" – the king as "a person who can bridge the heavenly, the earthly, and the human." See Jiang, 164.

¹³² Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 81, 151-178, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ubc/detail.action?docID=1936765>.

Bell, should be thought of as a serious and morally equivalent, if not superior, competitor to Western electoral democracy.¹³³

Bell demonstrates conversance with politically salient Confucian ideas, practices and institutions and with how they have shaped the political reality of China in the past and present. Consequently, he provides an account of how the CCP has been able to remain legitimate to the eyes of most Chinese people through appropriating Confucian ideas and practices as devices of legitimation for its rule. As part of an attempt to prove that political meritocracy could still be legitimate without electoral democracy, Bell analyses three main sources of undemocratic legitimacy (that is, legitimacy *not* originated from elections) the CCP draws on: nationalism, performance legitimacy, and political meritocracy.

Confucianism plays a role in each of them. In terms of nationalism, Bell states that the CCP recognizes Confucianism as a useful element of “soft” nationalism, namely pride in the culture and history of one’s nation, to bolster its ideological legitimacy given that “few Chinese believe in Marxism” now.¹³⁴ This “soft” brand of nationalism is more effective in peaceful times and is more controllable than a “hard” and bellicose nationalism, which incites resentment towards “outside interference” and “foreign powers.”¹³⁵ The narrative that the CCP “successfully avenged ‘national humiliation’” caused by imperial intrusions in the 19th and early 20th century is a key constitutive element of this “hard” nationalism, which is indoctrinated to the masses through the so-called “patriotic education.”¹³⁶

In terms of performance legitimacy, Bell cites the *Analects* of Confucius, *Mencius*, and historical practices of benevolent and caring Chinese emperors in times of crises.¹³⁷ On

¹³³ “My conclusion is that China can and should improve its meritocratic system: it needs exams that more effectively test for politically relevant intellectual abilities, more women in leadership positions to increase the likelihood that leaders have the social skills required for effective policy making, and more systematic use of a peer-review system to promote political officials motivated by the desire to serve the public.” Bell, 8.

¹³⁴ Bell, 139, 141.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

this basis, he argues the idea that the government has an obligation to improve the material well-being of the people has deep, Confucian roots and forms an important source of the CCP's legitimacy.¹³⁸ Finally, regarding political meritocracy as a source of legitimacy, Bell finds its roots in Confucian classics such as the *Record of Rites (Liji)* and argues that "Confucians ... are explicit that even an ideal society would need to be governed by leaders of above-average moral and political talent."¹³⁹ Nonetheless, Bell states that "the CCP has been cautious about promoting political meritocracy as an ideal because it coexists uneasily with egalitarian communist ideology," but it is "fully aware that political meritocracy can help to justify its rule."¹⁴⁰

Through Bell's analysis, we could clearly see that Confucianism and the CCP's rule is tightly interwoven together. However, when evaluating these sources of legitimacy, Bell's point of view comes dangerously close to that of the CCP and of the "virtuous gentleman," or *junzi*, in Confucian political thought to the extent that he fails to critically challenge neither of those two perspectives, nor the authoritarian operation of power that they approve and support.¹⁴¹ The main question for Bell in analysing these sources of legitimacy is whether they could be sustainable and, if not, how we could make them so. As Bell writes, "The question is whether these sources of legitimacy will be sufficient in the future."¹⁴² It is prompted by this question that Bell raises suggestions for improvement, such as expanding political participation.¹⁴³ However, such measures could not make these sources of legitimacy sustainable forever. Ultimately, he argues that it must be shown, at some point in the future,

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 146, 147.

¹⁴¹ As Baogang He and Mark Warren point out in responding to Bell's book, "In the case of China, the cost of mistaking 'meritocracy' with a regime is that questions of power within regime types are obscured." See Baogang He and Mark E. Warren, "Can Meritocracy Replace Democracy? A Conceptual Framework," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46, no. 9 (August 17, 2020): 1094, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453720948388>.

¹⁴² Bell, 139.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 149.

that “without a shadow of doubt that the people support political meritocracy.”¹⁴⁴ That is, using electoral democracy to justify political meritocracy.

But could something like a universal referendum “legitimate” political meritocracy? What Bell fails to account for is the power of the CCP, in appropriating Confucian thought and employing the rhetoric of “patriotic worrying” and “national rejuvenation,” to shape the experience of ordinary citizens and their understandings of politics. The role of the CCP, as I argue shortly, is an obstacle for democratic struggles in China. It is important for scholars to grasp the self-understandings of the agents under study; nonetheless, it is equally important to attend to the local configurations of power and their effects on them, as well as to *criticize* agents’ self-understandings.

In other words, although, as Bell is eager to point out, according to survey data the majority of Chinese people endorse the idea of a guardian government which paternalistically govern for the better interests of its subjects over liberal democracy, it does not mean that we do not need to scrutinize and criticize the morality of such an idea and the uneven political and historical processes through which such an idea becomes ingrained in the minds of people.¹⁴⁵

In a review essay of two recently published books on Confucianism and democracy respectively by Sungmoon Kim and Shaun O’Dwyer, Baogang He takes issues with “the retreat into theory,” which refers to theorists’ tendency to engage “scholarly discussions on the theoretical issues of democracy with reference to Western scholars and writings without addressing actual real-life problems in the relevant countries.”¹⁴⁶ He maintains that this turn presents a serious problem for Confucian democracy studies: “The more scholars indulge in

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 147, 137-138.

¹⁴⁶ Baogang He, “Whither Confucian Democracy Studies,” *Political Theory* 49, no. 2 (October 17, 2020): 346, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591720966252>.

purely theoretical building without bothering with real local issues or problems, the less relevant Confucian democracy theories are to the concrete processes of democratization in East Asian.”¹⁴⁷ To avoid this prospect, He proposes a problem-driven and empirical-based institutional approach that addresses “local problems and establish local connections.”¹⁴⁸

In terms of “local problems,” two of them are particularly relevant to democracy and democratic struggles in China. First, theorists like Sungmoon Kim have advocated for a citizen-based approach to democracy against the elitist tendency, expressed by Confucian theories and ideas, that has been co-opted by the CCP. Yet, “how to combine the citizen’s perspective with an intrinsically elitist orientation” in Confucian political thought remains an issue.¹⁴⁹ More urgently still, how, if it is possible, could we transcend Confucianism’s “traditional role of justifying the power of emperors?”¹⁵⁰ Secondly, Confucian democracy studies need to find a way to address the feature of hybridity demonstrated by East Asian democrats and democracies. The former South Korean president Kim Dae Jung serves as an example of a hybrid democrat as he “was known for using his Confucian moral principles to conduct remonstrations, to espouse the Christian value of forgiveness, and to promote liberal social welfare policy.”¹⁵¹ Additionally, Sungmoon Kim observes a hybrid political culture that “describes the mixture of democracy and Confucianism in a variety of ways at different levels.”¹⁵²

To address these problems, He proposes a problem-driven and empirical-based institutional approach. He urges theorists engage with practical and real-life issues and problems concerning democratization or found in democracies in East Asia and beyond.¹⁵³ In

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 344.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 344, 346.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 346.

doing so, He argues that Confucian democracy theorists should adopt an institutional approach and present answers that “pass the empirical tests.”¹⁵⁴ More specifically, Confucian democracy theorists should adopt an “institutional approach to the modern transformation of Confucian institutions, the institutional designs of Confucian democracy, and the institutional configuration or manifestation of Confucian democracy.”¹⁵⁵

He’s criticism of “the retreat into theory” and call for Confucian democracy theorists to engage with real-life problems should be heeded, although I have some reservations about the emphasis on conceiving institutional designs of Confucian democracy: would this approach be the most effective in addressing the kind of real-life problems thwarting the realization of a more democratic life today in East Asia? We should first understand that the sort of “real-life problems” in question must include those that result from conflicting demands of different normative systems (e.g., liberal and Confucianism), are experienced in the daily lives of East Asians, and are embodied both on *personal* and *institutional* levels: for instance, “should grown children live with their parents to fulfill the demands of filial piety or should they move on as autonomous adults competing in a capitalist economy?”¹⁵⁶ “To what extent is critical political discourse a transgression against loyalty to the state?”¹⁵⁷

Answering these difficult questions seems to require, first and foremost, a comparative and interpretive approach that seeks to understand and criticise the strong evaluations people make, namely, what goods one *ought to* desire.¹⁵⁸ This, in turn, calls for scrutiny of the assumptions, logics, languages, and power operations that give the framings to such questions and influence individuals to reason and act on politics in the way they do.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ling and Shih, 65.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Taylor, “*Understanding and Ethnocentricity*,” 120

Only on the basis of such efforts could we judge whether a certain “Confucian” institution could actually serve democratic purposes and understand why and how it does so.

In other words, to tackle the issue of “the retreat into theory,” we must take the actors’ experiences of politics in “Confucian societies” as our starting points. Moreover, we must think of democracy not merely as a coherent model of government derived from a certain theoretical paradigm, but as a concrete way of life and an existential relationality. Finally, we must understand that democracy is not achieved when a certain institutional arrangement is established. That is, we should refuse to make judgements in the following way: if and only if a certain political regime is established, a society could safely declare that it is democratic and rest assured.

This narrow, minimalist approach is bound to neglect sites of democratic practices that currently exist outside of the contexts named based on limited human experiences and parochial knowledge, and look past resources and occasions for performing democratic subjectivities that do not correspond to the supposed character of “the people fit for democracy.”¹⁵⁹ Additionally, presupposing that democracy has a determinate and finished form, it closes democracy to potential democratic practices and subjectivities that are yet to come and underestimates the dangers that have wreaked havoc with and continue to haunt our democratic life, such as messianism, hyper-individualism, and populism.¹⁶⁰

Theorists could not solely look at Confucianism, either. In East Asian societies today, Confucian scripts interact with multiple and boundary-crossing ideological and structural influences at different levels in shaping the meaning and (im)possibilities of “Chinese” and “China.” Thus, Confucianism could at best function as a source of moral and civic education and should not be used to form the totalizing character of a constitutional order.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Wedeen, “The Politics of Deliberation: Qat Chews as Public Spheres in Yemen.”

¹⁶⁰ Dallmayr, 49-59.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 103-120.

To make these ideas clearer, Ling and Shih's study of Taiwanese politics at the end of the 20th century provides a case in point. In 1996, then-president Lee Teng-hui attempted to expand the power of presidency through an *ad hoc* committee called the National Development Council (NDC). The New Party, a Chinese nationalist, splinter party of the Kuomintang (KMT), protested against Lee's attempt on the basis that "the NDC was an extra-institutional (*tizhiwai*) organization that violated the principle of 'checks and balances' in government."¹⁶² However, the New Party's protest suffered widespread criticism – newspaper editorials criticized the New Party for deliberately ruining the consensus and unity in Taiwan and for hating Taiwan and ideologically fixing on China. In contrast, support for Lee's power grab was cast in terms of selflessness, public-mindedness and common good.¹⁶³ Legislators were less concerned about issues of constitutionality than they were with "the international implications of Taiwan's democratization" – a democratic Taiwan could distinguish itself clearly in the international community against "China's 'rogue' status," a sentiment that "draws on an older tradition of anti-imperialist, Chinese nationalism."¹⁶⁴

Ling and Shih point out that the liberal political institutions in Taiwan, although well established, were not seen and used by the elites and the masses to uphold constitutional rules, constrain the power of political leaders, or facilitate the formation and competition of citizen interest groups.¹⁶⁵ By and large, they functioned as a "liberal face" to the Confucian and nativist-nationalist rationales of power that inform political actions. For instance, within the Confucian context, electoral politics were energized "through top-down, state-initiated mobilizations" as self-promotion and "divisive" competition for material interests on the part of citizen interest groups are seen as "selfish" or "self-centered," and electoral victory was

¹⁶² Ling and Shih, 70.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 77-81.

seen to signify “the public’s willingness to entrust power in a particular individual.”¹⁶⁶

Democracy was supported “as the most popular (and internationally accepted) means of installing virtuous, benevolent elite rule.”¹⁶⁷

At the turn of the 21st century, the identity of Taiwan’s democracy seems murky, unsettled, contradictory and unfinished. Although the political system in Taiwan is equipped with robust liberal political institutions, it could still be “authoritarian in political action” due to the interplay of differing understandings of politics and the local configuration of power. At the same time, we could also see hope for democracy in such a dynamic space. As Ling and Shih argue, the “uneven, unwieldy nature of politics in postcolonial Taiwan” destabilizes the political discourse to consider more and alternative understandings of the common good.”¹⁶⁸

In our globalising world, democratic politics in postcolonial societies is located within a space where norms and traditions, moral sensibilities, self-understandings and practices, and institutions cut across cultural, national, and linguistic boundaries and dichotomies such as “local/global,” “us/others,” “West/East.” These dynamics clash with and shade into one another in local struggles for power that involve model-defying ironies and paradoxes as well as prediction-confirming observations. Where an empiricist-scientific and Western-centric conception of democracy may see “deviations,” “inferiorities,” or “incompatibilities,” on which basis hasty judgements of “failures of democratization” are pronounced, we could just as easily find hope for a differing and deferred democracy. We would also gain a clearer sense of the work cut-out for us as democrats and as theorists who strive to deparochialize democracy.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 78, 81.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

But what could democracy mean if it does not simply mean a determined form of government? How could we think of democracy as unlimited, without a fixed epistemic concept or identity? And what does this thinking amount to? Furthermore, how could we encourage everyone, especially those who have been deemed “unfit for democracy,” to join? For these questions, I now turn to Jacques Derrida and Fred Dallmayr and the idea of “democracy to come.”

4.2 Democracy to Come: Here and Now

Derrida proposes the syntagma “democracy to come” to gesture towards the unconditionality, a release from human mastery or control and an openness towards who or what comes to pass, within the concept of democracy. For Derrida, democracy to come is affected by a sense of aporia or apophysis that renders it indeterminate and interminable. Derrida gestures towards the apophatic character of democracy to come by invoking the notion of “khōra,” “a spacing before any determination.”¹⁶⁹ Democracy to come would be the spacing of the political in which “a call might be taken up and take hold: the call for a thinking of the event *to come*, of the democracy *to come*, of the reason *to come*.”¹⁷⁰

In this sense, democracy to come is *not* a regulative ideal that falls within the realm of the possible yet indefinitely deferred, something that is “within the power of someone, some ‘I can,’” to realise or think of as realizable, nor is it a future already “assigned” by a regulative Idea.¹⁷¹ Instead, Derrida gestures towards the indecidability of democracy to come, its resistance to be defined once and for all by any sovereignty or sovereign power and be subjected to its attempt to present itself as a truly, existing democracy.¹⁷² This is expressed in

¹⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 82.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 87-88.

the “to come,” which signifies the coming of an event, which could not be foreseen, mastered, or engineered and remains foreign to “the order of my possibilities,” that is, “the theoretical, the descriptive, the constative, and the performative.”¹⁷³

With the idea of “to come,” paradoxically, Derrida also gestures towards “a responsibility and decision,” “the absolute and unconditional urgency of the *here and now*” because democracy to come is not impossible in the purely negative sense; it is “undeniably *real*,” “sensible,” could not be forever deferred but must be “claimed and taken up.”¹⁷⁴ In Derrida’s words, democracy to come “announces itself; it precedes me, swoops down upon and seizes me *here and now* in a nonvirtualizable way, in actuality and not potentiality.”¹⁷⁵ This does not mean, however, that one could act in possession of a determinate knowledge of democracy to come, which renders any decision “annulled.”¹⁷⁶ Thus, we could only “call” for a democracy to come, although the coming of which is never guaranteed.

This call amounts to “the inheritance of promise,” the *promise* of a democracy truly worthy of its name handed down in the heritage of “such and such a determination of democracy,” understood *not* as “the democracy (national or international, state or trans-state) of the *future*” that is “certain to happen,” but as “a promise that is kept in memory, that is handed down, inherited, claimed and taken up.”¹⁷⁷ To inherit such a promise, democracy to come calls for “a militant and interminable political critique. A weapon aimed at the enemies of democracy.”¹⁷⁸ At the same time, it grants one the unconditional freedom “to criticize everything publicly, including the idea of democracy, its concept, its history, and its name.”¹⁷⁹ In answering the responsibility of the here and now, we simultaneously wait with a

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 84, 85.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 85, 89.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

“patient perhaps,” with an unconditional hospitality that welcomes whomever or whatever comes to pass.¹⁸⁰

The idea of “democracy to come” is brought closer to the “here and now” by Fred Dallmayr who questions Derrida’s argument on two issues. First, Dallmayr argues that we cannot just trust an event to come which could be emancipatory or destructive, “without some further clarification or elaboration” – a sort of aspiration that adumbrates the future like “the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita or the Buddhist sutras.”¹⁸¹ Second, although in agreement with the “unconditionality” and “eventfulness” of democracy to come, Dallmayr argues that human agents must at least “prepare the way” for its coming, which means being “sincerely committed to the quest for justice and peace, or a peace with justice.”¹⁸²

With these reservations, Dallmayr highlights the significance of “democrats to come” – people who willingly democratize themselves through deliberation and practices.¹⁸³ Thus, he places the emphasis on understanding “politics as relational praxis.” Drawing on Montesquieu, Dallmayr highlights one of the “paradigmatic shifts” undergirding the transition of political regimes from monarchical to republican or democratic. Namely, the shift in “existential relationality,” the animating spirit of political regimes, from “respect for distinctive merit” to “love of equality.”¹⁸⁴ This “equality,” understood as “relational symmetry” and “a concrete way of life or mode of conduct,” is “synonymous with ‘love of democracy.’”¹⁸⁵ In addition to the shift towards relational equality, the closely related philosophical shift from “static essentialism to the valorization of possibility or potentiality” renders this democratic equality “a possibility in need of nurturing care” rather than an a

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 88-91.

¹⁸¹ Dallmayr, 39.

¹⁸² Ibid., 39.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

priori condition. This means that “being equal” is not an essence or “law of nature,” but a constant and concrete struggle.¹⁸⁶

Drawing on Claude Lefort, Dallmayr argues that the combination of relationality and potentiality gives modern democracy its distinctive feature – “the present absence of ‘the people’: they are absent as a fixed entity or determinate substance, but they are present as a potentiality (*potentia*) and as an ever beckoning source of empowerment and legitimation.”¹⁸⁷ The non-essentialized or non-positive character of “the people” is accented as a warning against two dangers or derailments of democracy: First, the danger of filling up the empty centre of democratic power and giving “the people” a unified, compact, and fixed embodiment as emblemized by totalitarianism.¹⁸⁸ Second, the danger of treating the empty centre of democracy as a factual void and disregard the role of “the people” as the source of legitimation.¹⁸⁹

The present absence of “the people” leads Dallmayr back to the “open-ended, unfinished character of both the ‘people’ and democracy,” reformulated into the interplay of three constitutive elements of democracy – “the people as constituent power (*potentia*), the political rulers and agents (*potestas*) competing for power, and the goal or basic orientation of the political community (*telos, eudaimonia*).”¹⁹⁰ These three elements form a “stable/unstable constellation or balance” that is “dynamic, precarious, and never static” as the excess of each – the occupation of the “empty space” by each – could lead to derailments of democracy.¹⁹¹ Hence, Dallmayr sums up the meaning of democracy succinctly, “In a word, democracy means continuous striving and struggle.”¹⁹²

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14, 150.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 151.

Resonating with Derrida's notion of "the inheritance of promise" and rejecting the thesis of conversionism, Dallmayr holds that democracy and the love of equality must be "nurtured by different societies and cultures from within," with their own "philosophical, religious, cultural, pedagogical" and other kinds of resources or traditions. However, these resources or traditions must be "rethought and re-energized from within in a democratic spirit."¹⁹³

These ideas, as I explain in the concluding section, are instructive for democratic struggles in China. Along with Dallmayr, and recognizing "the absolute and unconditional urgency of the *here and now*," I contend that instead of thinking of a "Confucian democracy" or a "China model" we should think of and work towards "democracy to come" in China. This would be simultaneously a call for *democrats* to come. Yet, to prepare the way for people to democratize themselves, we must first understand, critique and reinterpret the deliberations and practices conducted in the countless idioms in China – I say "idiom" because human thinking always occurs in an idiom– in the spirit of love of equality and in a commitment to the quest for a peace with justice. ¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 40.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, building on Dallmayr's points, I want to point towards two obstacles in the way of democracy to come in China. First, how could we make Confucian political thought a source for love of equality? I argue that we must start with criticizing the hierarchical positioning of "the emperor" and "the sage" or "the gentleman" above the "little men."¹⁹⁵ This leads me to my argument against the arrogation of "moral exemplarity" to the intellectual and political elites within and outside the CCP.

The practice of the emperor and the literati to assume a role of a prescient, selfless and dutiful exemplar and spokesman has a long history in Sino-Confucian literary, philosophical, and political traditions. Gloria Davies's extensive and detailed study of the practice and writings of "patriotic worrying," or *youhuan*, finds abundant instructions of this moral sensibility, mentality and responsibility in Confucian classics and literati.¹⁹⁶ *Youhuan* could be translated as "crisis mentality," or following Perry Link, "the worrying mentality."¹⁹⁷ The term was widely used by Confucian literati, often to extol the moral responsibility of worrying on behalf of the people and one's prince. For instance, the Song-era official and poet Fan Zhongyan wrote in a poem: "Be the first to worry about the worries of the world, the last to take pleasure in its pleasure" (*xian tianxia zhi you er you, hou tianxia zhi le er le*).¹⁹⁸ The term "*tianxia*," or "all under heaven," makes appearances in Confucian axioms of the same spirit, for instance, "assuming personal responsibility for all under Heaven" and "assuming personal responsibility for the rights and wrongs of all teachings under Heaven" (*yi tianxia fengjiao wei jiren*), which are attributed to Mencius.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Chih-yu Shih, "The West That Is Not in the West: Identifying the Self in Oriental Modernity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 537–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2010.523823>.

¹⁹⁶ Gloria Davies, *Worrying about China: The Language of Chinese Inquiry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 16.

¹⁹⁷ Perry Link, *Evening Chats in Beijing* (New York: Norton, 1992), 249 quoted in *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹⁸ Davies, 17.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

One important point to note here is the “modern patriotic inflection” in the term “youhuan,” made “after China’s defeat in the Opium Wars of the 1840s,” when the Qing empire was facing an existential threat at the hands of foreign imperial powers which were technologically and militarily more advanced.²⁰⁰ One’s act and object of worrying was sharpened from a general moral responsibility, a “selfless concern for the problems of one’s time,” into “a defense of the Confucian imperium.”²⁰¹ This turn of events imbued “youhuan” with its patriotic inflection and firmly attached “China,” as opposed to “tianxia,” to the worrying act, in a pessimistic and despairing tone. As Davies writes, “As a praxis, worrying about China carries the moral obligation of first identifying and then solving perceived Chinese problems (*Zhongguo wenti*), whether social, political, cultural, historical, or economic, in relation to the unified public cause of achieving China’s national perfection.”²⁰²

“Chinese intellectuals” arrogated this grand moral obligation to themselves. The category “Chinese intellectuals” itself is a claimed, “contemporary (but also transhistorical)” and “presumed collectivity of interests”; it draws on “earlier formulations such as the *shidaiifu* (Confucian scholars who pass the imperial examinations), *zhishifenzi* (intellectuals), and *dushuren* (scholars).”²⁰³ The demonstrated mastery of the classical written language or *wenyan*, “the lingua franca of the Confucian imperium,” allowed intellectuals such as Liang Qichao to perform the role of “an exemplary ‘Chinese’” and enabled his writings to assume an authority position.²⁰⁴ This function of written language did not cease to exist when *wenyan* was replaced by “*baihua*,” or “the modern Chinese vernacular.” *Baihua* was inaugurated by May Fourth intellectuals, such as Lu Xun and Hu Shi, with the distinct purpose of replacing

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 14

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

wenyan, the elite written language of officials and literati. Baihua was meant as “a language for ‘the masses’” and as “the tool for creating a modern Chinese culture.”²⁰⁵

However, the “rhetoric of national crisis” employed by advocates of baihua at its inauguration in the late 1910s and early 1920s has produced “heteronomic effects” on the users of baihua, which put them under the same “moral spell of Confucian axioms.”²⁰⁶ In an essay written in 1922, Lu Xun, for instance, figured the traditional Chinese culture and society as an “iron house having not a single window and virtually indestructible.”²⁰⁷ He assumed the identity of “an awakened or prescient member of the ‘iron house’” who made the possibly futile decision to wake up those sleeping in the iron house, who were bound to die if not awakened to attempt to destroy the iron house together.²⁰⁸ Thus, Davies writes, “to this day Sinophone critical discourse continues to affirm the civilizational and/or national representativeness of written Chinese, particularly with reference to the prose of an acknowledged exemplar.”²⁰⁹

Davies rightly maintains that the practice of “patriotic worrying” must rid itself of the magisterial tone and the obligation of moral exemplarity arrogated to Chinese intellectuals, from which they derive undue legitimacy for their proposals to solve Chinese problems. This practice orients Sinophone critical inquiry toward “detecting merits and flaws within the national culture on the assumption that the intellectual ... is fit to judge how the quality of Chinese culture and ‘the people’ should be improved.”²¹⁰ It gives Chinese intellectuals the mandate to being spokespeople for China, demanding them to “write as if they are

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

representing the collective interests of the Chinese people rather than defending their own informed preferences.”²¹¹

However, today the CCP, not the Chinese intellectuals, is the most adroit and powerful actor at exploiting the rhetoric of national crisis to depict itself as the time-tested and selfless leader of China anointed by history. The narrative of “the century of humiliation” depicts the CCP as the savior of the nation who successfully led the people eradicate the direct or indirect intrusion of imperial powers. More importantly, it allows the CCP to brush off criticism of its authoritarian rule, such as those directed at the genocide of Uyghurs and the suppression of democratic movement in Hong Kong, by blaming “the West” for fabricating lies and instigating a “peaceful evolution” in China.²¹² Finally, stories that extol “benevolent” emperors who take care of the people in crises like drought and flooding fall squarely in line with the Confucian idea of a selfless prince towards whom people surrender to.²¹³ Against this background, the CCP’s grand celebration of such achievements as the elimination of extreme rural poverty could be seen as a political act that declares its superior moral character and hence its legitimacy to rule.²¹⁴

In short, the obligation of moral exemplarity supports a qualitative relationship that is opposed to the spirit of democracy – the symmetrical relationality, the love of equality. It silences or marginalises the countless individuals who they claim to speak for, seen as waiting to be protected or saved, rather than as equal participants in collective social and political life. Through this perspective, ordinary Chinese people are dismissed as insignificant “little men” and “aliens” incapable of “rectifying” themselves to obtain a selfless-moral

²¹¹ Ibid., 20.

²¹² Ian Johnson, “A Most Adaptable Party,” *The New York Review*, July 2021, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/07/01/chinese-communist-party-most-adaptable/>.

²¹³ Shih, “The West That Is Not in the West: Identifying the Self in Oriental Modernity,” 544.

²¹⁴ Johnson, “A Most Adaptable Party.”

character.²¹⁵ Hence, they occupy the lowest rung of the moral order and live at the periphery of the under-heaven.²¹⁶ In addition, to the extent that the performance of moral exemplarity generates a moral imperative of emulation and submission on the part of “little men” and “aliens,” it dims the possibility for democrats to come and militates against the unconditional openness to whomever or whatever comes to pass.

The second obstacle lying in the way of democracy to come is related to the practice of “patriotic worrying” and to the politics of comparing “the West” and “China,” specifically to the question of the impervious and reified boundaries between “Western” and “Chinese.” The centric position occupied by “China” in Sinophone discourses is an obstacle for democracy to come. That is, it presents a “China” that is constantly determined and reappropriated but always reified as a thing out there in the world, whose interests and well-being demands individuals to perform moral duties and selfless sacrifices. For instance, the “emotive formulations” of China as the object “of a collective national quest of redemption” are so powerful that it is almost “unthinkable” to issue criticism against “patriotism and ‘the Chinese nation’ within the density of this language.”²¹⁷ Consequently, elite invocations of *what “China” needs* have become an instrument of power and control, ripe for manipulation, which marginalises, if not eliminates yet, the (possibility of a) equal and inclusive dialogue of the common good.

May Fourth intellectuals who understood China’s predicament as due to its “obsolete” traditions and norms and were eager to “modernize” China with Western knowledge of “science” and “democracy.” In contrast, Davies explains that “the preoccupation of many

²¹⁵ According to what Shih calls “the Chinese under-heaven” worldview, one moves towards the moral centre, namely, the emperor who represents “China” and “those serving the emperor,” and produces a “selfless state of mind” by means of “self-rectification” through practising “Confucian rituals” and moving towards selflessness “in accordance with the dynastic institution.” Those who fail to do so, namely, “the little men,” represent “a mass of inferior Others.” See *ibid.*

²¹⁶*ibid.*

²¹⁷ Davies, 21.

present-day intellectuals is with recovering China's cultural integrity or even civilizational grandeur."²¹⁸ This tendency is manifest in attempts to secure "a proper foundation of Chinese thought," one that would one day restore China's cultural authority.²¹⁹

The memory of "the century of humiliation" reverberates in this contemporary preoccupation. Davies argues that the development of Chinese intellectual discourse, at least since the 19th century, was not afforded the relatively "pristine and uncontaminated historical nursery of intellectual development" in which contemporary Western intellectual discourse has grown up, "essentially in the company of itself," and "has evolved, as it were, undisturbed and from within."²²⁰ Consequently, modern Chinese intellectual discourse "has always been forced into the position of having to either acknowledge or deny the preeminence of Western thought."²²¹ This necessity leads to a "competition" between the position of "heightened alert and suspicion of the Other" and that of "the very hope that the other, the stranger, does indeed have something to offer that is of value to China."²²² Thus, the cultural and political rupture caused by the colonial and imperial invasion, destruction and exploitation, expressed through "the rhetoric of awakening to the pain and fear of cultural and spiritual loss," has contributed the maintenance of a sharp distinction between "the foreign" and "the Chinese" in Chinese intellectual discourse.²²³

Yet, Davies also notes "a general Sinophone preference for certitude in the use of language,"²²⁴ a confidence in the transparent and stable relationship between words and meanings and in the capacity of language to encapsulate reality and what is out there. This view has generated axiomatic and essentialist accounts of Chinese culture in which "China"

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 43.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

is imagined “as something that is constitutive of the self” and gained a “metaphysical presence.”²²⁵ Thus, accounts of what “being a Chinese” means and how “China” could be perfected is “imagined as corresponding to ‘reality’” and they are “ultimately defended by recourse to a presence outside language, as if it were ‘in our very bones.’”²²⁶

Here we return to the large issue of the role of the CCP and the extent to which it has coopted the rhetoric of patriotic worrying, the practice of moral exemplarity and spokespersonship, and constructs of “China.” It has constructed and reappropriated essentializing accounts that contrast “China” and “being Chinese” to “Western” with cunning and skill. Official propaganda since Mao has not ceased to exploit, as Xiaomei Chen describes, “a deeply rooted practice of alluding to the Occident as a contrasting ‘Other’ in order to define whatever one believes to be distinctly ‘Chinese’” in order to “discipline, and ultimately to dominate, the Chinese self at home.”²²⁷

A recent example, as Timothy Cheek and David Ownby report, is Xi Jinping’s revival of a “mystifying (or infuriating)” travesty of Marxism as the state ideology.²²⁸ They are referring in particular to Xi Jinping’s “thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” The formulation “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” was not unfamiliar to Chinese people as it was used after Mao’s death by Deng Xiaoping and party cadres under his tutelage to prioritize market reforms and economic growth over “ideological conformity.”²²⁹ Unintentionally, Deng’s reforms, in conjunction with modern technological inventions and globalization, diversified ways of being Chinese and Chinese intellectuals – “globe-trotting capitalists, alienated intellectuals, internet-addicted teenagers, scrappy

²²⁵ Ibid., 20, 23.

²²⁶ Ibid., 40.

²²⁷ Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China*, 39, 5.

²²⁸ Timothy Cheek and David Ownby, “Make China Marxist Again,” *Dissent Magazine*, 2018, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/making-china-marxist-again-xi-jinping-thought>.

²²⁹ Ibid.

entrepreneurs, and forgotten masses” and “liberals,” “New Leftists,” “New Confucians.”²³⁰ These new identities and practices not only look unruly to the somewhat atrophied “ideological state” first established by the CCP under Mao; they also “mak[e] it harder to sell Xi’s version of the China Dream.”²³¹

Consequently, “Making China Marxist again” constitutes a response and an effort to “ensure that the CCP continues to determine the content and direction of China’s ‘rejuvenation’ to the status of a world power abroad and a prosperous, civilized society at home.”²³² Here, we see clear tropes of “patriotic worrying,” namely the perfection of the Chinese nation and the revival of Chinese civilizational grandeur and integrity, put to use for domestic domination. The Maoist practices that the CCP has revived, such as “‘criticism and self-criticism,’ ‘rectification,’ and the ‘mass line,’” also ring similar to the Confucian practice of self-discipline and self-rectification to obtain the exemplary and selfless status of “the gentlemen.”²³³ The latter, again, is deemed to bear the greatest responsibility to maintain the well-being of the harmonious order. As Cheek and Ownby write, “A doctrine [Xi Jinping Thought] that lays claim to fairness and public service reassures the average citizen that there is order under heaven.”²³⁴

In summary, deparochializing the meaning of “democracy” is inextricably connected to democratic struggles in China, not least because of the intricate, uneven, and inextricable relationship between “Chinese” and “Western” traditions of political thought and practice in the past and present. Insights from comparative political theory help us untangle the

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Zheping Huang, “China’s Most Popular App Is a Propaganda Tool Teaching Xi Jinping Thought,” *South China Morning Post*, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/apps-social/article/2186037/chinas-most-popular-app-propaganda-tool-teaching-xi-jinping-thought>; AFP, “Top Chinese Officials Forced to Carry out Self-Criticisms as Xi Jinping Enforces Party Loyalty,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 2018, <https://hongkongfp.com/2018/12/28/top-chinese-officials-forced-carry-self-criticisms-xi-jinping-enforces-party-loyalty/>.

²³⁴ Timothy Cheek and David Ownby

superimposed acts of comparison, construction, appropriation, and reappropriation that have come to constitute this relationship and shape the political reality of China. Meanwhile, those insights help steer our analysis clear of crude, dichotomic, and ethnocentric judgements so that we could recognize the hybrid political reality of China. This reality appears unruly to any pristine and clean-cut theories of democracy as it is woven together with a variety of resources and shaped by an array of actors, with the CCP being the dominant among them in the present day. This hybridity could be reconciled with an understanding of democracy as unfinished and indeterminate, as an interminable political critique and the synonymous love of equality. To prepare the way for “democracy to come” and “democrats to come,” we must nurture this love of equality and re-energize and reinterpret the political tradition of China. To start, we should critique the understandings, idioms, and practices within Chinese politics where “the people” are compared to and oppressed as inferior moral subjects to be saved and cared for by the CCP, whose subjectivities are constructed by the CCP’s determination of the “correct” ways of “being Chinese.”

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