



BOOK REVIEWS

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- 507 *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin*, ed. **Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith** (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018). Reviewed by M. Dimova-Cookson.
- 510 **Gregory Conti**, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2019). Reviewed by A. Middleton.
- 513 **Youngmin Kim**, *A History of Chinese Political Thought* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2018). Reviewed by Y. Pines.

the history of Victorian Britain. This is not a controversial work which sets out to undermine existing interpretations, so it offers no radical revisions to which historians will have to respond. Nor is it one of those studies of political thought which requires us to think again about the driving forces behind concrete political change: it takes place on too abstract a plane to necessitate new histories of Victorian electoral reform, even though Conti has given us a far clearer picture of some of the elaborated arguments available to the political actors responsible. There is nothing here which destabilizes the accounts offered in existing ideas-in-politics histories, like Robert Saunders' approvingly cited 2011 *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848–1867*. What the book does — and it is no small contribution — is to cast new light on questions about the relations between different parliamentary theories, to do so with equal style and precision, and to provide a basis for wider reflections on how Victorian political thought worked. *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation*, then, ought to be required reading not just for scholars interested in high-level conceptions of representation, sociology and democracy, but also for anyone who hopes to grasp the full scope, sophistication and texture of nineteenth-century British political theory.

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Youngmin Kim, *A History of Chinese Political Thought* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2018), x + 273 pp., £17.99, ISBN 978 0 7456 5247 4 (pbk).

China is blessed with one of the richest traditions of political thought worldwide. This thought was formed during one of the most dynamic periods in China's long history, ominously named the age of the Warring States (453–221 BC). That was the age of bloody struggles and devastating wars, but also of rapid economic growth and profound social transformation, of technological breakthroughs and of radical innovations in economy, warfare and administrative techniques. This was also the most creative age in China's intellectual history: the age of bold departures and remarkable ideological pluralism, which was unhindered by either political or religious orthodoxies. Thinkers of the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought competed for the rulers' patronage, moving from one court to another in search of better employment. They proposed distinct remedies to social, political, economic and military maladies, their views ranging from harsh authoritarianism to anarchistic individualism, from support of a laissez-faire economy to advocacy of state monopolies, from blatant militarism to radical pacifism. Their ideas regarding the nature of the ruler's authority, regarding ruler-minister, ruler-people and state-society relations, regarding the nature of elite belonging and the intellectual's social and political obligations, were further developed during China's lengthy

imperial age (221 BC–AD 1912). Aspects of this extraordinary, rich legacy continue to influence China's political life well into the present day.

This richness and lasting impact notwithstanding, traditional Chinese political thought remained all but ignored by Western scholars, particularly by political scientists.³ Only recently did this situation, dubbed half a century ago 'a parochialism in space and time which deeply infects Western intellectual life',⁴ start to change. Prompted by the growing interest in 'China's model' by the advance of comparative studies (especially in the field of history which outgrew its original West-centric perspectives) and by the increasing availability of adequate translations of primary and secondary Chinese texts, scholars started paying increasing attention to peculiarities of China's indigenous intellectual tradition. Youngmin Kim's new monograph, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, is a welcome addition to the field.

In the Preface to his book, Kim explains his goals: to 'address China's place anew in the worldwide history of political formations and ideas' without, however, subjugating his study to the 'ahistorical and nationalistic' perspectives that in Kim's eyes 'overwhelmingly dominate' current research (p. viii). In order to 'provide an interpretative inquiry into Chinese political thinkers' engagement with their historical world', Kim opts for 'a theoretically informed long-term historical narrative' (p. viii). This narrative unfolds in subsequent chapters that cover China's history from the Zhou age (c. 1046–255 BC) to our days (these are mentioned briefly in the epilogue). Each of the chapters focuses on one period, but also tries to be 'cumulatively thematic' (p. 21) insofar as it explores a dominant trend of political thought during the given period and addresses, even if briefly, the impact of the ideas under discussion in other periods. For instance, Chapter 3 ('The State') focuses primarily on the Qin (221–207 BC) and Former Han (206/202 BC–AD 9 dynasties), but it also sometimes departs from these centuries. The chapter shows how the Qin model in which 'a wide stretch of territory came completely under the heavy hand of central government officials' was 'reevaluated' in the Han dynasty, and underwent subsequent 'waxing and waning' (p. 76) well into the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1636/1644–1912) dynasties. Similarly, the discussion of imperial autocracy in Chapter 7 focuses on the early Ming dynasty, but starts with a brief (in my eyes too brief) survey of earlier precedents.

There are many advantages in the innovative structure of Kim's book. First, it allows him to highlight the dynamism and complexity of Chinese political thought rather than picturing it as a monochromatic expression of 'oriental despotism'. Second, Kim's engagement with political thought in its broadest

³ See Yuri Pines, 'Introduction: Ideology and Power in Early China', in *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China*, ed. Yuri Pines, Paul R. Goldin and Martin Kern (Leiden, 2015), pp. 1–28.

⁴ John Schrecker, 'Review of *Masters of Chinese Political Thought*', ed. Sebastian de Grazia', *Political Theory*, 2 (4) (1974), p. 462.

meaning allows him to go beyond specific thinkers and beyond political essays, presenting a much broader picture that includes perceptive analysis of literary fiction (pp. 109–12), of classical exegesis (pp. 164–7), and even of painting (pp. 203–10). Third, Kim succeeds in highlighting the complex and constantly negotiated nature of ‘Chineseness’; in particular, his discussion of Choson (Korea) reimagining itself as ‘little China’ (pp. 219–22) is highly interesting. These, and numerous astute observations scattered throughout the book, are its major strengths.

This said, Kim’s attempt to narrate in a space of 257 pages (excluding index) the political, social and intellectual history of China over three millennia, comes at a price. There are three problems of the proposed historical-cum-thematic format. First is the problem of recurring historical inaccuracies. Putting aside minor typos and other errata,⁵ there are greater flaws, such as a very odd supposition that the *Book of Lord Shang* associated with the major reformer, Shang Yang (d. 338 BC) is a ‘Han text’ (p. 86). Kim consequently discusses this text in the context of early imperial ideology rather than in the context of the Warring States period of political thought, to which the *Book of Lord Shang* definitely belongs.⁶ Second, the compression of historical narrative often comes at a price. For instance, the text omits entirely the lengthy period from the end of the Western Han in AD 9 to the rise of the Tang dynasty in 618. Yet it was during that period that China’s imperial polity faced its gravest systemic challenge from the power of local elites (augmented in the latter half of that period by the nomadic warrior aristocracy in northern China). Gradually, these elites had all but annulled the power of the imperial state. The dynamics of the state’s devolution and the subsequent resurrection of its power under the nomadic Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) and its successor regimes could highlight many important features of China’s imperial polity, and the omission of these events is unfortunate. Third, and most consequentially, Kim’s eagerness to demonstrate discontinuities in China’s intellectual development sometimes causes him to flatten complex social, political and intellectual phenomena, as specified below.

In my eyes, the most problematic chapter of the book is Chapter 4 (‘Aristocracy’), which deals primarily with the Tang dynasty (618–907). Eager to highlight the dramatic difference between the Tang aristocratic society and that of the subsequent Song dynasty (960–1279), Kim presents a highly inaccurate picture of the Tang. In particular, his insistence that the Tang age was marked by ‘passive conformity as political ideology’ (pp. 102–4) strikes me

⁵ E.g., dating the end of the Ming dynasty to 1744 rather than 1644 (p. 81), transliterating Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–55) as ‘Xuanzhong’ (p. 95), or association of the medieval name of China ‘Tanhaj’ or ‘Tabga’ with the Tang dynasty (618–907) (p. 97); in reality, this name derives from the Tuoba rulers of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534).

⁶ For my treatment of the *Book of Lord Shang*, its content and its dating, see Yuri Pines, *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China* (New York, 2017). Kim probably could not access this book before the publication of his monograph.

as a caricature. To refute this odd generalization, suffice it to mention that China's aristocratic age (stretching *sensu stricto* from the fixation of hereditary aristocracy during the Northern Wei reforms of 494 to the demise of the aristocratic clans in the aftermath of Tang's collapse in 907) witnessed more large-scale popular uprising (not to speak of military mutinies) than most other parallel ages in Chinese history. Add to these multiple examples of open or subtle protest against the ruling social and political norms that permeate high culture of this age (think of Du Fu's [712–70] poetry!).⁷ For sure reducing all this to 'passive conformity' is simply untenable.

Kim's presentation of the aristocratic Tang society as decidedly conformist and passive serves him to highlight the role of Dao Learning (the 'School of the True Way', often dubbed Neo-Confucianism) as a 'powerful alternative to the Tang aristocratic culture' (p. 113). That the Song social, political and intellectual life differed dramatically from the Tang is undeniable. But eager to emphasize the differences, Kim goes too far in glossing over markedly hierarchical and conformist aspects of Dao Learning itself. That his discussion omits entirely metaphysical stipulations of social (and particularly gender) hierarchy put forward by the Dao Learning scholars — the so-called Three Bonds (ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife) — is incomprehensible. By beautifying Dao Learning as a 'metaphysical republic' (pp. 124–30), Kim ignores the fundamental nature of this intellectual current as directed at the 'noble men' (*junzi*) — male elite members who were to serve as social leaders, in particular through perpetuating and strengthening social hierarchy. It is true that Dao Learning (and Confucian theory in general) allowed social mobility insofar as (almost) every male had the potential of becoming a 'noble man' through self-cultivation and learning. But hailing this feature of Confucian ideology should not come at the expense of noticing the importance of the divide between the 'noble men' and their antipodes, the 'petty men' (*xiaoren*). This divide stands at the heart of the teaching of Confucius himself and of his manifold followers, including the proponents of Dao Learning.⁸

My quibbles notwithstanding, Kim should be congratulated on writing this innovative, interesting and insightful study. I hope that this and similar publications will encourage scholars of political sciences worldwide to start acquainting themselves with Chinese political thought in its immense richness and complexity.

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⁷ For Du Fu, see Stephen Owen's 'Introduction', in his *The Poetry of Du Fu* (Berlin, 2015).

⁸ See Yuri Pines, 'Confucius's Elitism: The Concepts of *junzi* and *xiaoren* revisited', in *A Concise Companion to Confucius*, ed. Paul R. Goldin (Chichester, 2017), pp. 164–84.