

Review of Bai, Tongdong. *China: The Political Philosophy of the Middle Kingdom*. World Political Theories. London and New York: Zed Books, 2012. viii, 206 pp. Hardcover \$116.95, ISBN 978-1-78032-076-2. Paperback \$29.95, ISBN 978-1-78032-075-5.

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Tongdong Bai's volume is a welcome addition to the variety of introductory texts on Chinese philosophy that have recently or are about to hit the market.¹ Apart from its brevity, there are several aspects to Bai's approach that distinguish his contribution. These include a focus solely on early Chinese political thought, treating it as a conversation among the Confucians (mainly Confucius and Mencius), the Daoists (almost exclusively Laozi), and the Legalists (Shang Yang and Han Feizi); an emphasis on the ways in which early Chinese philosophy was addressing many of the issues that subsequently arose in Western modernity; and numerous asides and some direct arguments meant to lead readers to sympathize with claims Bai ardently defends in his other works, about the value of Confucianism in the modern world and how Confucianism's "ideal regime, adjusted to today's reality, may serve to address political issues more effectively than liberal democracy" (11). This approach, as we shall see, has its disadvantages as well as its advantages, but it should be noted that I for one am happy to see its publication and believe it would serve well as a text for a variety of courses in political philosophy/theory, particularly those focusing on comparative issues.

Chapter 1 is devoted to Bai's description of the historical context within which Chinese political thought began. In particular, he uses this description to argue that what happened during the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BCE) and the Warring States (476-222 BCE) periods² was a transition that bore "uncanny similarities to the European transition from the Middle Ages to (Western) modernity" (19). He argues that this modernization raised a range of critical problems that the thinkers he addresses try in various ways to solve. Important among these problems is

the need to create a ‘social glue,’ both to connect the people to the rulers and to connect the people to each other in large and populous states.³ Tied to this, Bai sees the fall of feudalism as leading to a situation where relationships can no longer be relied upon to organize and control society.⁴ And, finally, Bai sees the fall of the Zhou Dynasty and the subsequent rise of numerous states fighting for survival and dominance as generating a need to deal with issues related to international relations.

Chapter 2, the first of two chapters on Confucianism, takes this group of thinkers as developing a social glue from their understanding of moral sentiments, latching on to *humanity* (Bai’s preferred translation for *ren* 仁) to serve this purpose.⁵ Humanity, on Bai’s account, includes compassion, which “serves to bind together a large and populous society of strangers (39).”⁶ A similar use is what makes Confucian familialism so important, thinks Bai, arguing that loving relations among members of society are necessary to keep the demands of the laws from becoming oppressive, which would result in the destruction of society. This chapter ends with an interesting discussion on the implications of Confucian ideas for environmentalism, animal rights, and feminism. And, while I suspect that not a few people will have substantial bones to pick with Bai’s analysis of these issues and how Confucianism can contribute (as I do later on), he raises these issues in such a manner as to highlight the possibility of his vision as an alternative to liberal democracy, and provides substantial fodder for those yearning for ways of demonstrating to students that Confucius was not just a stuffy old guy obsessed with straightening his mat. I can imagine many fruitful class debates and discussions arising from this and the following chapter.

Chapter 3 focuses more directly on Confucian ideas for developing the ruling class and providing a justification for its rule, laying out at times the ideas of Confucius and Mencius, at times a broader ‘Confucian’ view (and, as we will see later, not always clearly differentiating

between the two). On Bai's interpretation, the ruler is justified insofar as he satisfies the people's interests—importantly not their perceived interests, but their actual interests. Tied in with this is the Confucian justification for social hierarchy which Bai treats as being a sort of “political difference principle” in the vein of John Rawls (70). Following his description of the early Confucian vision of the state, Bai turns to what he calls the Confucian hybrid regime, trying to reconcile its hierarchical structure with populism. In his words, what the Confucians advocate is a “hybrid regime, preserving the good elements of popular democracy...while attempting to balance its overemphasis on the popular will with a meritocratic component” (79-80). This is a claim I will return to below.

Chapter 4 sees Bai turning to Daoism, or, rather, the political thought of Laozi. Here, he tries to lay out why Laozi's response to the ills of the time is so different from what the early Confucians have to offer. In doing so, Bai emphasizes how Laozi understands the idea of non-action (*wuwei* 無為), importantly pointing to ways in which it is similar to Confucius's ideas yet vitally different.⁷ He continues on to describe what he sees as the cyclic movement of the Dao in which each of any pair of opposites (e.g. good and bad, being and non-being,⁸ beauty and ugliness) gives rise to the other in an unending cycle. Any attempt on the part of human beings to change the course of this Dao will have only adverse effects (87-88). In ending this chapter, Bai turns to an analysis of Laozi's more positive program and why he sees it as doomed to failure. The only hope for a comprehensive and constructive adaptation of the teaching of Laozi, he argues, “lies in the expectation of some apocalyptic occurrence” (109).

In Chapter 5, Bai sets his sights on Legalism, particularly the ideas of Shang Yang and Han Feizi. He highlights the advances that the Legalists make to social organization, bureaucratic structure, and legal apparatus while emphasizing the ways in which Han Feizi

borrowed from Laozi, particularly his notion of naturalness.⁹ He demonstrates how a certain conception of human nature underlies Han Feizi's political philosophy, leading Han Feizi to the conclusion that it is only via the two handles of reward and punishment that the state can successfully be organized.

The final chapter looks at how the various ideas and ways of thought addressed in the preceding chapters continued to develop in later ages. In particular, Bai argues that what we see from the Han Dynasty on is a recognition of the value of the Legalist bureaucratic structure for achieving Confucian ends, while also acknowledging some of the extremely problematic ways in which these ideas were brought together and manipulated.

As noted, overall, I found Bai's book refreshing, interesting and well worth reading for anyone interested in East Asian or comparative political thought. However, there are a few things that worry me. Bai does not make very clear when he is talking about the actual political ideas of the early Confucians and when he is talking about a contemporary political theory of his own design that could well be consistent with at least the fundamental tenets of early Confucianism, a kind of Confucian revival for the modern age. In Chapter 3, for example, Bai argues that the Confucians advocate a hybrid regime that attempts to preserve what is good about popular democracy, namely "the rule of law; protection of basic liberties; checks and balances..." (80). Given the context, it is difficult to see whether Bai is claiming that the early Confucians actually do advocate such a regime or whether the claim is that *contemporary* Confucians, like Bai himself, envision a political theory rooted in the insights of Confucius and Mencius but taken in a different direction than these thinkers themselves envisioned. It is one thing to say that concepts such as rule of law, protection of basic liberties, and checks and balances are *consistent*

with the core precepts of Confucianism, and quite another to claim that Mencius himself advocates any of these.¹⁰

In a related issue, the fact that Bai is concerned with the rule of law from a Confucian perspective makes the absence of much discussion of Xunzi all the more puzzling. In a footnote, Bai explains that this is due to the fact that “his influence in later dynasties was not as obvious and significant as Confucius and Mencius” (186). Perhaps not as obvious, but he was certainly taken seriously throughout Chinese history, and even Zhu Xi, who canonized Mencius and had harsh words for Xunzi’s moral psychology and theory of moral cultivation, cites approvingly aspects of Xunzi’s political philosophy.¹¹ Be that as it may, it seems that Xunzi provides us with a way of understanding the role of laws in a much richer fashion than either Confucius or Mencius. While one cannot derive the rule of law from Xunzi, much more progress can be made than if one were simply to rely upon earlier Confucians. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of Xunzi allows us to realize that it may not be necessary to view the Han Dynasty as combining Legalist bureaucracy and laws with Confucian virtue. Rather, early Confucianism has, in Xunzi, substantial resources to lean upon in constructing a bureaucratic and legal structure.

It is obvious throughout this book that Bai is an ardent defender of a particular vision of Confucianism, and as noted above, he doesn’t try to hide it. This has particular benefits if this volume is to be used as a textbook. However, one sometimes feels that Bai’s own views of what Confucianism is (or should be) color his interpretation of these early thinkers, leading him to draw conclusions that are not supported by the textual evidence. For example, in his discussion of animal rights (52-57), he points to a variety of passages from both Confucius and Mencius that demonstrate that they have compassion for the suffering of animals, a compassion that Bai thinks can lead to showing care and recognizing obligations toward animals. Further, he brings

up the point that we do not need to talk about animal rights in order to think that we may have obligations toward animals. These are interesting ideas, and working through them and developing their implications may well enrich our current philosophical discourse. However, things are not as simple as Bai leaves them.

For example, he cites the famous passage from *Mencius* 1A7 where King Xuan of Qi, upon seeing an ox about to be killed for a ritual ceremony, is unable to bear to see its fear. This fear, which the king equates to that of an innocent man being led to his execution, leads him to spare the life of the ox, replacing it with a sheep. It seems that Bai's point in raising this example is to demonstrate how Confucian conceptions of compassion can lead to humane treatment of animals. However, I do not draw the same conclusion. First of all, while the ox is spared, a sheep is used in its place, since the ritual is understood to be of more importance than the life of an animal (something that the King and Mencius seem to agree upon). So while compassion leads to the saving of one animal, it leads to the death of another in its place; it is unclear how this compassion leads to a different treatment of animals *per se*.¹²

Furthermore, Mencius ends his discussion with the King by saying, in Bai's translation,

The attitude of a gentleman towards animals is this: once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die, and once having heard their cry, he cannot bear to eat their flesh. *That is why the gentleman keeps his distance from the kitchen* (56, *italics mine*).

It seems clear that Mencius is not advocating changing our actions toward animals based on the compassion that arises upon encountering their suffering. Rather, given the way our emotions affect us, we should stay away from situations likely to evoke our compassion toward animals. If you want to enjoy your steak, Mencius seems to be saying, don't feed Daisy the calf when she's growing up, and have someone else butcher her and prepare her for dinner.

The problem I see here is not so much that it is impossible for a Confucian conception of compassion to lead us to a better treatment of animals.¹³ Rather it is a tendency on Bai's part to highlight only those aspects of the early Confucian tradition that may be useful for moving toward his preferred understanding of Confucianism, while glossing over those parts that may pose more problems. Explicitly recognizing these aspects of Mencius, ruminating on why he makes this claim, and analyzing whether it represents an inconsistency in his thought, would make this discussion much more valuable, particularly as a textbook, for it would provide students with the tools to begin deeper discussions on the ways in which Confucianism may have resources available for dealing with a wide array of applied ethical and political issues, while also recognizing that the perspectives of the early Confucians are not merely earlier images of positions that seem appropriate to many in today's world.

In closing, I wish to note again that for a political theory or philosophy class that makes use of a close reading of primary text translations, this volume can serve as a very useful supplement. Bai raises a range of thought-provoking ideas while very clearly demonstrating that the ideas of Chinese political thinkers from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period resonate with many contemporary issues in political philosophy and have the potential to provide us with interesting and in some cases extremely different ways of looking at political and social organization.

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¹ Recent publications include Hyun Höchsmann, *On Philosophy in China*. Wadsworth Philosophers Series (New York: Thomson Wadsworth, 2004), JeeLoo Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), Karyn L. Lai, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), Haiming Wen, *Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Manyul Im, *Classical Chinese Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

² These are the dates Bai provides but, as he notes, there is much debate over them (18).

³ A similar argument with regards to social glue is made by Herbert Fingarette who suggests that the reason that Confucius chooses the culture of the Zhou Dynasty is not because of its inherent normativity but rather because tradition has the power to serve as at least part of this social glue. See Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius - the Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

⁴ One might also quibble with Bai's take on this as being comparable to European modernism. Nobles were still connected to each other through birth and class and peasants were still tied to the land, and to rulers as those who owned and controlled the land. His thesis about modernism would make for a very interesting study in comparative intellectual history, but the extent to which this comparison lends force to Bai's overall argument is sometimes unclear.

⁵ In an introductory book of this type, Bai can certainly be excused for not spending time arguing for his particular translations of important philosophical terms such as *ren*. However, it would have been useful, here, and elsewhere, had Bai provided references to important secondary literature that bears on issues that he is unable to explore in greater depth. Here, it would have been particularly useful to see a reference to Kwong-loi Shun, "Rén 仁 and Lǐ 禮 in the *Analects*," in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). For an example an introductory work that does an excellent job of providing readers with the tools to delve deeper into the material it covers, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000).

⁶ A couple of things might be worth noting here. First, the extent to which the early Confucians include the lower classes in their theories about how to generate social cohesion could be questioned. Further, it would seem that compassion would tie one just as much to those outside the state as to those who happen to be within its borders.

⁷ While it is refreshing to see this recognition, it would have been nice had Bai gone into a bit more depth here, pointing to the numerous passages in the *Analects* that provide quite a sympathetic account of what we might think of as nascent Daoist ideals and reflecting on why we see a fairly drastic change by the time Mencius comes along. In this regard, a mention of Edward Slingerland's *Effortless Action: Wu-Wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) would have been useful.

⁸ Bai himself uses these terms, but acknowledges that ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ capture only certain aspects *you* 有 and *wu* 無 respectively and points the reader to an article where he discusses these terms in more detail (87, n. 4). It would be useful, however, given his audience and the importance of these terms, to have provided a bit more detail, perhaps discussing ways in which *you* points to having definite characteristics while *wu* points to lacking definite characteristics. I thank Bryan W. Van Norden for discussion on these terms.

⁹ Understanding how Han Feizi was indebted to Laozi is very valuable, but a discussion of the ways in which Han Feizi appropriated aspects Laozi’s vocabulary while radically shifting the meanings and implications of key ideas would have been useful.

¹⁰ In his recent book, Stephen Angle argues that democracy, broadly understood as participatory politics, is essential for upholding other, more fundamental Confucian values. See his *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012). One of the problems with the Confucian tradition on this account would be that it has not fully recognized this need.

¹¹ For example, Zhu Xi (1130-1200) approves of Xunzi’s defense of corporal punishment rather than symbolic punishments (Li Jingde 黎靖德, ed. *The Classified Sayings of Master Zhu, with Index Appended* 朱子語類附所引, eight volumes. (Beijing: Zhengzhong shuju, 1973, 78.136/3181)). Further, as Kai Marchal points out, the views of Zhu Xi’s friend Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙 (1137–1181) on war and political authority owe much to Xunzi (“Lü Zuqian’s Political Philosophy,” in John Makeham, ed. *Dao Companion to Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. (New York: Springer, 2010, 205)). Additionally, Xunzi’s formulation of the idea that good governance arises out of having the right person rather than out of laws found the favor of Hu Hong 胡宏 (1105-1161) among others (*The Collected Works of Hu Hong* 胡宏集. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987, 8.18)). I thank Justin Tiwald for bringing these to my attention.

¹² There is no implication that in the future oxen should be spared (at the expense of sheep). Rather, it is accepted that animals must be used as sacrificial offerings to satisfy the rituals, regardless of the compassion evoked by their fear.

¹³ Indeed, later Confucians do take this stance, not simply toward animals, but toward all aspects of our environment. As Bai notes, the later Confucian thinker Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) refused to cut the grass in front of his house because he felt one with it (54). While a variety of Confucians from the Song Dynasty onward hold some version of this view, this is an important way in which they differ drastically from the early Confucians (and one can certainly be pardoned for thinking that Buddhist thought played an important role in this shift). The Japanese thinker Itō Jinsai (1627-1705), the Chinese scholar Dai Zhen (1722-1776), and the Korean intellectual Jeong Yakyong (Dasan, 1762–1836), all have points of agreement with the orthodox neo-Confucian views of Zhu Xi regarding the connection of human beings to the world around us and the obligations this connection places upon us. However, their specific accounts of the extent of our obligations and how they are grounded differ dramatically. Coming to understand these differences and the arguments underlying them seems essential to the task of evaluating the

potential of the Confucian tradition to make substantive contributions to contemporary discourses on our obligations toward animals.