



Youngmin Kim. *A History of Chinese Political Thought*. Cambridge: Polity, 2018. x + 273 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7456-5247-4.

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Can the history of Chinese political thought be summed up in one book? Even more pointedly, can it be summed up without recourse to the language of “essences,” to the notion of a “Chinese mind,” or to the idea of an enduring Chinese political culture? Youngmin Kim accomplishes such a difficult feat in *A History of Chinese Political Thought*.

Kim’s hope is to fill the void left unoccupied since Hsiao Kung-chuan’s canonical book of the same title, published in 1979 (p. 2). He does not claim to present an “exhaustive history of Chinese political thought,” but rather to offer a “non-nationalistic and non-essentialist” one (p. 19). His book not only involves “close readings of specific commentaries on Classical texts” (pp. 21-22), but also includes a great amount of historical survey, as well as analysis of literature and art. The book starts with Confucius in the sixth century BC and concludes with present-day China’s quest for a new global order. While its arrangement is chronological, it is also subject-driven, the chapters describing visions of the political community held at various points in history: the second chapter is entitled “Enlightened Customary Community”; the fifth, “Aristocratic society”; the eighth, “Autocracy.” Kim also offers a short but intriguing foray at the end of the book into how these visions

of the Chinese polity were viewed by other East Asian countries, especially Korea.

Two arguments can be said to be central to the book as a whole: First, Kim shows that while China is commonly associated with authoritarianism and a big state, neither concept captures well the relationship between the Chinese state and society, especially during the late imperial period. Second, Chinese identity was never fixed; Chineseness transformed throughout China’s history.

In laying out the first argument, Kim notes, citing R. Bin Wong, how “discourses on the Chinese state are characterized by the paradoxical coexistence of the image of a strong state and an abundance of passive governance” (p. 11). Kim explains this tension by appealing to Timothy Mitchell’s idea of a “state effect,” which can be achieved without the government itself acting, but by outsourcing instead “much of the work to semi-autonomous societal actors” (p. 11). Thus, in his discussion of late imperial China (the period encompassing the Ming [1368-1644] and Qing [1636-1912] dynasties), Kim writes that the state “was no longer organized primarily on monist principles like official bureaucracy” but that it in fact “incorporated the associative dynamic and relied on social networks” (p. 82), thus achieving “state effect” “within the interstices of state and society” (p. 83). This does not mean that the Chi-

nese state was not powerful but simply that its power was “shared” rather than concentrated in the government’s hands (p. 188).

Kim resists using the language of “civil society” to describe the role of Chinese social actors because he sees the term as a product of the European historical experience. Drawing on the work of Benjamin Elman, he shows that these actors often operated on the basis of kinship ties. Furthermore, the idea of civil society suggests a “conflictual state-society model” (p. 184) that does not apply to the Chinese case. Indeed, Kim offers a close analysis of the classic *The Great Learning*—made canonical during the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279) and a “paradigm for Chinese political thought” in the centuries that followed (p. 186)—to show how the individual, family, and state were made to form an “organic whole” (p. 184). But the lack of conflict between the state and local actors also meant “the absence of conceptions of representative institutions that position themselves in radical tension with the central government” (p. 136). For, in Europe, such representative institutions arose as the product of demands made by the feudal lords against the monarch, whereas local Chinese nobles served as “extensions of central authority despite their reform-mindedness” (p. 180). Be that as it may, Kim’s survey of the state and various conceptions of it in Chinese history suggests that a “more powerful, centralized, and intrusive state” was not an enduring legacy of Chinese history, but a product of twentieth-century China (p. 214). Put differently, the Communist state cannot be read back as the natural culmination of China’s history.

The second argument concerns the definition of Chineseness, which Kim discusses through the notion of “central efflorescence,” an idea “mobilized by political elites in fashioning Chinese identity since the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220)” (p. 6). He contends, for example, that the rise of the Xiongnu Empire in Central Asia as a result of the expansionism of the Qin dynasty (221-06 BC) led

to the transformation of the notion of “central efflorescence” from a “civilizational marker” to “an identifier of polity” (p. 85). When the Song dynasty moved south, occupying a much smaller territory than its predecessors, the definition of Chineseness could no longer be geographic and thus became cultural. The Ming, for their part, added an ethnic dimension to the mix of geography and culture. Finally, Kim describes “central efflorescence” as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” today in that it is an expectation that drives “China’s quest for a new order with imperial resonance” (p. 231).

While he is keen on emphasizing the shifts in the definition of Chinese identity throughout the centuries, Kim does not dismiss all sense of continuity. In response to Lionel Jensen’s argument that Confucianism is a Western invention, he argues that terms “such as *ru* (a traditional term referring to Chinese literati) may convey a stronger sense of identity than Jensen permits and have shown remarkable persistence throughout Chinese history” (p. 13). How then, to explain the “co-existence of the persistence and resilience of such identity markers as Chineseness, on the one hand, and the widening differences among their ideas in terms of their contents, on the other” (p. 9)? To do so, Kim resorts to the concept of culture developed by Alan Patten. Patten offers what he calls a “social lineage account” of culture in which “culture is what people share when they have shared subjection to a common formative context” (quoted, p. 8). By “formative context,” Patten means institutions of socialization like schools, the media, language, and institutions of the government. Kim draws on this account to suggest that what “unites people throughout Chinese history is not the content of their ideas but the collective identity they themselves construct” (p. 8). But herein lies a difficulty: in Patten’s account, the emphasis is on subjection to a common experience of socialization rather than on the creation of such an experience and of the institutions that produce it. For Kim, on the other hand, the emphasis is on agents’ creation of the collective identity that is

Chineseness. Indeed, the tension between structure and agency, and a related tension between text and context, runs throughout the book.

In discussing the method he follows in writing his history, Kim describes Chinese political thought as “a series of creative responses to broad shifts in the constraints and opportunities of the external milieu” (p. 218). The external milieu here can be understood as the social and political milieu, as some of Kim’s discussions reveal. For example, citing Yuri Pines, he argues that Confucius’s conception of a “customary community” developed as a response to the decline of the existing “sociopolitical order” and “hierarchical authority” (p. 30). In his discussion of the Tang dynasty (chapter 5), he shows how a particular form of aristocratic society developed as a way to respond to the “unprecedented ethnic and cultural diversity” brought about by the collapse of the Xiongnu Empire in the third century and the migration of non-Han peoples into the territory under the remit of the Han (p. 96). His interpretation of Ma Zhiyuan’s play *Autumn in the Han Palace*, written under Mongol rule in the late thirteenth century, involves the idea that it was the “new political circumstances of foreign rule” that led Ma to give a new valence to existing ideas of Chineseness (p. 155).

At other points, however, the external milieu is presented as intellectual rather than sociopolitical. Indeed, Kim writes that “the particular constellation of categories within which individuals came to understand their problems and their options defined the range of possible solutions to their problems” (p. 22). Of Mozi, Xunzi, Laozi, Hanfeizi, Yang Zhu, Mencius, and Zhuangzi, Kim writes that they “established the terms of reference that have continued to structure much of Chinese political thinking” (p. 46). Of Confucius’s conception of a customary community, he argues that it was “transmitted to later imperial dynasties” just as “Roman notions of a law-governed political community were transmitted to medieval

Europe” (p. 45). Concerning the text of *The Great Learning* and the eight steps it contains, he contends that we should view them as outlining “formal conditions of discourse rather than a straightforward reflection of reality or detached philosophical theory building” (p. 185).

Whether the external milieu is understood as sociopolitical or as intellectual, it can be considered as a structural constraint on agents’ actions, beliefs, and ideas. Yet Kim resists structural accounts. He thus writes: “while I do not dismiss the importance of structural insights, my own approach is more strongly informed by flexible agent-based theory” (p. 145). He continues by clarifying that he does not mean “to suggest that agents worked in isolation from structural forces, but rather to suggest that there were sufficiently complex processes going on within the interplay between structure and agent to merit a more nuanced study”. The example he gives is of “sinocentric relations” which are “plastic, capable of being manipulated and interpreted in a wide variety of ways”; he then presents Ma’s conception of sinocentrism under Mongol rule, mentioned above, as one illustration of this idea. Thus Ma’s conception is not simply a response to Mongol rule, but also an intervention in the debate on Chinese identity that shaped this identity.

To what extent, then, can Ma’s conception be a response to but not largely constrained by the existing political reality, not to speak of conditions of discourse set by *The Great Learning*, by Confucius, and by the thinkers of the classical period who provided China with its “terms of reference”? And how do we know that Ma’s new conception influenced the political situation relating to Chineseness or intellectual debates around it or even both? Kim writes in passing that “every thought creates a new situation which breeds its own new theoretical problems” (p. 127). He also concludes the book with the argument that “Chinese intellectual history in the twentieth century is not a simple response to the West, but characterized by the

dynamic efforts of particular agents who were forced to consider themselves as a people with a particular history, character, and destiny” (p. 217). In his rendering of the history of Chinese political thought, agents, thoughts, texts, political contexts, and linguistic structures all affect each other in turn, and examples of each are picked at various points to illustrate the changing conceptions, and realities, of the Chinese political world.

But a trade-off is inevitable between scope and strictness of method. Furthermore, it is arguably precisely the flexibility of his methodology, and his ecumenical knowledge, that widen the appeal of the book to include nonspecialist readers. Indeed, Kim’s book is not only learned, but also succeeds at presenting Chinese political thought as a brimming, lively tradition. As he writes, “For some scholars, like myself, the tradition is interesting primarily because it is still alive” (p. 219). His readers are also likely to find it interesting because Kim is faithful to its vibrancy.

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