

*Nobility and Civility: Asian Ideals of Leadership and the Common Good.* By William T. de Bary. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004.

*Realms of Freedom in Modern China.* By William C. Kirby, ed. The Making of Modern Freedom Series. Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004.

LIBERTARIAN FASCINATION WITH CHINA has usually tended to one of two poles. The first, and the reaction this author typically gets when she tells libertarians that she studies Chinese thought, is disgust. This is not surprising: the “communitarian,” group-oriented ethic that seems to lie behind so much of the political propaganda in the Mao and even Deng eras has neatly dovetailed with a more recent upsurge in various academic defenses of what are often called “Asian values,” encouraging an ideal of political life that counters everything libertarians and classical liberals believe in regarding autonomy, freedom, and independence. The other, opposite reaction is fascination with the extent to which particular Chinese philosophies embody certain of our own values, especially those at odds with the communitarian picture—be it a celebration of radical individualism in philosophical Daoism, or the spontaneous ordering of traditional practice found in some Confucianisms.

Significantly, the disagreements these two poles represent do not revolve around what it is we should be looking for, but rather whether or not what we are looking for is actually there. In this sense libertarian interest tends to replicate quite closely (minus certain pro-capitalist sympathies, of course) academic trends in the investigation and explication of China and Chinese thought. These researches generally bring to the fore questions like: Can China support a human rights regime, or not? Can Asian values support capitalist modernity, or not? With few exceptions, most of what this academic discourse seeks to clarify is not *why* China should adopt one or another of our “Western values,” but whether it can. Even those scholars who decry the end-of-history mentality—a mindset induced by a globalizing world that seems to have already and with finality embraced liberal democracy and the market economy—often fail to provide a well-informed, sensitive alternative to

Western-centrism that goes much beyond simply declaring their own non-Western-centrism.

Two recent books suggest the tide may be changing, however. Rather than simply initiate yet another round of discussion on the now-insipid “human rights in China” topic, these books each bring exemplary scholarship to bear on exploring less typical questions about the possibilities and limitations of Chinese thought. The edited volume by William C. Kirby, *Realms of Freedom in Modern China*, collects 11 erudite essays about the extent to which China (primarily the mainland People’s Republic of China, but also the Republic of China on Taiwan) has crafted spaces for or consciousness of liberty in modern and late Imperial times. William T. de Bary, a long-standing figure in Sinology widely esteemed for his work on neo-Confucianism, draws on the considerable intellectual resources of his own edited Sources of Asian Traditions series to consider if or how Asian ideas of civil norms can inform the emerging global discourse in his new book *Nobility and Civility: Asian Ideals of Leadership and the Common Good*.

Although still largely centered on Western norms—as any book seeking to uncover “realms of freedom” in China must almost necessarily be—the essays in the Kirby volume deserve high praise for the unusual ways they interpret those norms and how they uncover possible resemblances in Chinese society. Several of the authors put their extensive cultural expertise to good use in explicating “freedom” in less typical contexts. William P. Alford and Yuanyuan Shen’s article, “Have You Eaten? Have You Divorced? Debating the Meaning of Freedom in Marriage in China,” proffers the institution of marriage as a doubly powerful lens through which to view both the possibility of liberal autonomy and personal choice within the institution itself, as well as the political and civic discussions that surround the revision of the law governing it. They point out that the historically strong link between marriage and the Confucian celebration of the family as the primary social unit has made for some unusual constraints not only on political, but also emotional, freedom. Alford and Shen explore in some detail the recommendations of Chinese academics and politicians for changing the law, giving the reader some sense of the reassuringly broad range of ideas and legally actionable grievances available to educated Chinese. Although the authors heavily qualify their assessment of this discussion in Chinese civil life as “free,” they do give evidence that increasing numbers of people have the capacity to intuit inequalities and injustices perpetrated by the state. For an emotionally invested institution like marriage this is none the less so, and presents special opportunities for political criticism on the part of

“female cadres [who] . . . have a greater appreciation than their male counterparts of the gap between the state’s stated ideals and its performance” (p. 261).

By far the most imaginative and hopeful of the essays in this volume is Robert P. Weller’s “Worship, Teachings, and State Power in China and Taiwan,” which suggests that the unusual organization (or more precisely, nonorganization) of Chinese religious practices makes for an extremely effective vehicle of political mobilization to protect local interests against the encroaching state. Libertarians looking for a spirit of self-help and independence could do little better than Taiwan’s many religion-based charitable societies: the largest, the Compassion Relief Merit Organization organized in 1960 by the Buddhist nun Yanzheng, had a charitable budget that surpassed the state welfare budget of Taipei (Taiwan’s largest city) in the 1990s (p. 298). Other, smaller groups are even more effective in helping their communities without (or sometimes against) intervention by government, mainly because the social relationships they foster center not around an organized “religion” as is the case with many Western religions, like Catholicism, but around localized practices and community-level gods that encourage particularist self-help over universalist ethics or national concerns. The picture is less encouraging when Weller leaves democratic Taiwan for Communist China, but the evidence he gathers points the way toward the less dramatic and overtly political places in which effective antiauthoritarian resistance may take root among local populations.

Almost all the essays in *Realms of Freedom* include caveats about how the depth of China’s civilization and the sheer length of her continuous history have converged to produce what in William Kirby’s words are “*alternative* Western conceptions of liberty, ‘liberation,’ democracy, and ‘people’s democracy,’” (p. 3; my emphasis) but a major drawback of the book is that not all the essays manage to persuade the reader that their authors have themselves actually come to terms with these “alternative” ideas.

Jean Oi’s contribution, “Realms of Freedom in Post-Mao China,” is typical in this regard. She warns that “if one looks more broadly at the overall political and economic system, at the levers the central state still does control, the case for a weakened state on the verge of collapse is dramatically overdrawn and misleading.” She holds that this is precisely because “many civic associations have emerged in China, but few are political” (pp. 273–74). Oi’s predictions, while pessimistic, are certainly well-informed, and there is much here to warn us against too quickly assuming that the triumph of democracy and liberal freedoms in Communist China is imminent.

Significantly, however, much of her evidence pointing to the failure of Chinese civil society to effectively challenge the country's hegemonic party-government is based on Western models, ones that prescribe the formulation of overtly political goals as a condition for civic associations to act as counterweights to centralized power. Her analysis does not consider the possibility that what she as a researcher is actually observing, and what she is presuming will lead to democratic participation and political accountability, may not closely correspond to the civil society models that obtain in other contexts.

It is presumably against such perspectives as Oi's that de Bary has written his latest book, a rambling adventure through the histories and political narratives of India, China, and Japan. His interest is not as ecumenical as it seems, however: the description of the book on the book jacket asks rather leadingly,

How can civilized life, human rights, and civil society be preserved if the material forces dominating world affairs are allowed to run blindly, uncontrolled by any cross-cultural consensus on how human values can be given effective expression and direction?

This sentiment is certainly shared by contemporary Western academics desperately fearful of the innovations, unpredictability, and "materialism" of modern capitalist economies, but they are far from the values of many Western and non-Western societies, including the Confucianism from which de Bary draws such inspiration. It is not certain that either Zhou-era Confucianism—that is, the "Confucianism" practiced by the presumed historical figure of Confucius—or the later neo-Confucian variant promoted by people like Zhu Xi or Wang Yangming, had any interest in achieving a global, cross-cultural consensus (why would they?) not to speak of the "human rights" and other items de Bary finds unquestionably necessary for contemporary life. Is it not the case that instead of bringing what they say into the service of our own agendas, that "non-Western" cultures may have something to offer us, especially regarding our own self-obsessed pathologies?

Indeed, some of the very figures de Bary cites, and their stories that he is so careful to explicate, speak against this possibility: one prominent example is the decidedly non-, bordering on anti-, social and political tendencies of early Indian Buddhism. De Bary is quick to mention (and seemingly with great relief), that even in this anti-worldly religion politics can intrude. He interprets King Ashoka's reliance on supposedly Buddhist doctrines to bring about political order—in the process fusing the ideal of the Buddhist ruler with the god-king of Hinduism—as proof that Buddhism too can be welded

to a “civil ethos and political morality” (p. 23). But de Bary is frustratingly silent when it comes to explaining why *this* ethos and *this* morality is to enjoy teleological primacy. That this mentality currently enjoys ascendancy among both Western and Asian intellectual elites does not explain how it constitutes a coherent or compelling goal for human society.

Another major problem in his book is his loose and usually undefended adoption of loaded words, especially “public sphere” and “communitarianism,” to explain the ideas documented in his book, especially those of Confucianism. De Bary is pretty honest about the fact that he is searching for equivalences, but this search, as well as his multiple comparisons of Asian concepts to Western ideas like natural law, would be more illuminating were he to depart from direct comparisons and instead construct arguments on their own foundations. When he does manage to do so, the result is highly thought-provoking. His fifth chapter, “Chrysanthemum and Sword Revisited,” alludes to Ruth Benedict’s famous ethnographic study of contemporary Japan, but exhibits its own merits as resource for rethinking the global discourse on rights and civic value that in most other places dominates de Bary’s selections. Here, he puts forward the ideals of beauty and gentility valued by Heian-era (c. tenth century CE) Japanese nobility as possible counterweights to social good. Yet de Bary has nothing but scorn for these aristocrats: their “refined aestheticism” came “at the expense of a social conscience, moral sensibility, and above all, any sense of concern for the public good or general welfare” (p. 91).

It is both unexpected and tragic that someone who has vested a lifetime in the meticulous explication of Confucianism and other Asian thought-systems should feel the need to compress them into contemporary academic debates, marked in the first place by what we may already see is unjustified, unexamined anticapitalist pathology. De Bary has precluded from the very beginning the possibility that even the values one most cherishes may be destabilized or even overhauled when a genuine cross-cultural encounter takes place. Yet the very flurry of names and ideas that make his book so hard to follow is enough to convince the reader that diversity, debate, and contention have existed and continue to exist in Chinese and Asian thought. We would do well to abide by this reality that so completely belies the professed motivation for the book: rather than look to control cross-cultural exchange by a consensus of values, we should embrace the opportunity it presents to destabilize, renegotiate, and potentially displace our own unexamined outlooks on political life.

At the same time, however, it is no doubt true that de Bary's Western-centrism isn't all his fault. The English political theory vocabulary has simply not evolved terms adequate to the task of comprehending non-Western thought. In this sense de Bary has done a great service in collecting numerous, rarely-considered sources of political thought and pointing out their potential connections to contemporary debates. Even if one disagrees with his moral grandstanding, de Bary's account provides enough resources to get beyond it. For example, he provides a translation of the late nineteenth century Japanese thinker Nakamura Masanao's essay "Past-Present, East-West: One Morality" that may resonate with many libertarians. Nakamura boldly states, "there is no freedom to be found apart from the moral person, and without freedom one is unable to choose goodness. Without freedom, one cannot be resolute and at ease" (p. 175).

This resonance prompts at least one unexpected observation: despite its Western origins, libertarian theory may have something to contribute to cross-cultural engagement. By virtue of encouraging unorthodox and iconoclastic views of the state and the current political order it supports, libertarianism or anarchism may act as a theoretical stepping-stone toward a less politics-centered vision of social order and thereby render its advocate more open to the radical discoveries of cross-cultural engagement. Answering the question of whether libertarian theory genuinely enjoys greater analytical purchase on these cross-cultural questions simply awaits greater numbers of libertarian theorists turning their attention to non-Western traditions.

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