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A Plea for a Comparative History of Economic Thought : Europe and China

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This contribution deals with the way the Chinese turn their eyes to the West, especially Europe.

There are good reasons to consider that a “culture of growth” has characterized the West on the basis of a combination of interest in scientific knowledge and applied techniques (see Mokyr, 2017¹⁾). One may point to that specificity of the Western countries to explain the rise of European domination over the world from the Renaissance onwards. For all its vantage points, however, the European “model” spread not only because it was perceived as a model to obtain efficient results, but because this expansion happened under the pressure exercised by forceful power. The notion of “soft power” comes late, actually brute force and witty science first conquered the world for European powers.

If, on the one hand, peoples were submitted and understandably resented these circumstances, on the other hand, all kinds of trade, economic, scientific and cultural flows brought major changes to various areas of the world, including our topic, China (Shen, 1996). One must bear in mind what the Chinese never forget (and probably never forgive), that is how they felt humiliated in the period of time between the Opium Wars and 1949. But that statement also hides aspects of modernization that occurred as well. As a consequence, resentment and both a good deal of admiration were coupled.

Values in politics and economics, techniques and sciences, were imported and adopted/adapted, shaping most elements of the modern disciplinary teaching and learning. The same holds true in the years 1979 and 1992, the two turning points to open the Chinese economy and face world exchange. This has been challenged for the last five years or so, since both Donald Trump became President of the USA with an anti-Chinese trade agenda and, later, COVID 19 pandemic spread throughout the world starting from the city of Wuhan. The history of sciences requires attention for past culture and present circumstances, both deserve to be cautiously examined. History has many sides – as Mokyr shows, while probably leaving aside too much the role and weight of economists and economic doctrines in that regard in his fine volume about the Western “culture of growth”. The research program called LIBEAC (Liberalism In Between Europe And China: European Research Council FP7-IRSES 317767) aimed at grasping better not only the introduction of modern European liberal ideas into China, but also how exchange from both sides remains helpful while threats can be even more damaging in the future than they have already been.

A comparative analysis must enter into details of arts and sciences to bring about significant results at

1) See references. Unfortunately (but cautiously since he could not make use of first-hand material), Joel Mokyr does not elaborate on China.

a higher level and on a larger scale so as to depict a broader picture of the relationship between Europe and China. In other words: time has come to see each other through the lens of the other's culture. Specialists have paved the way. Schools of sinology in the West are old and brilliant, and after a century and a half of massive Chinese confrontation with Western ideas, we may also think that new approaches, closer to equalizing viewpoints, are actualized in the West. Conversely, China has gone from importing knowledge and techniques to creating a strong body of academia and exporting ideas and solutions that may seem to offer alternative views.

In one word, economics becomes cultural and values do guide the rise of new technology as well. On the basis of the study both of a few classic texts dealing with economic matters, the analyst may rebuild economic ideas and conceptions adapted to the development and structure of productive forces in China nowadays – for instance, detailed business details regarding especially the administration of public works and the role that state intervention may play in markets for various primary goods, are topical issues. But they are also embedded in a traditional Chinese frame work of thought (such as the so-called debate on salt and iron, for instance²⁾). Here introduce a blank line that separates the §§ before and after it. The line may have a sign like * in the middle to show well its role of separating two parts.

To make clear what we mean by using classical ideas to better understand present days, let us show that using.. notions applied within a Chinese context in circumstances paralleling ancient Europe to some extent requires great caution, for instance, in that “employment” in ancient times included slavery³⁾. In medieval times, in terms of money and credit, one must relate current ideas to fantastic ones about the “fountain of wealth” (Glahn, 1996), for instance. Lastly, although a historical analysis of various original texts is necessary, we cannot undertake that here (see Swann 1950). Some studies date back to decades ago that still hold, and some new advances have been made: however, how far should one go by way of *re-constructing* ideas from the past according to contemporary views?

On both sides, frames of thought were anchored in millenary traditions. In Europe, since ancient Greece and Aristotle on the one hand, and China and Confucius, on the other hand, and so as to make an easy mark all the same very accurate regarding many disciplines, including economics, on both sides, hundreds of years of history have forged concepts whose convergence is much improbable without conflict. Again, works such as the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, on the one hand, and works by Confucius, Mencius, etc., on the other hand, did not frame their respective worlds less deeply than did actual practises of production, trade and consumption. Both worlds had at least as many conceptual and traditional boundaries as geographical borders. Crossing them was (and is) always a challenge. For Europeans, it was partly due to the Church's missionary endeavors and pushed by a “culture of growth” from the Renaissance onwards (Mokyr, 2017).

A backward glance at history is thus indispensable to approach the mindset of the whole of both civilizations. Retrospective extrapolation is, however, quite difficult. One may (wrongly) assume more

2) For the debate on production of iron and steel and the role of the state as early as the Han dynasty, there exists a large literature. For example, see (Wagner 2001).

3) Though ancient China could not be called a slaveholding society due to the low percentage of the population with such a status, there was debt slavery, prisoners of war were forced into slavery, and the selling of children was a common practice (Wilbur 1943).

than what can scientifically truly be said. If the long-lasting influences of ideas from Greek times and from the Han dynasty respectively are compared, then one needs to display comparative chronologies and comparative tables of concepts. This must be done explicitly by specialists, economic historians, for instance, while more global observers can but question such a parallel and point to what could be particularly illuminating.

In this research, I sometimes call upon the literature to provide and illustrate this point as explicitly as possible. For instance, Peach (2017) thought that the *apparent* endorsement of “laissez faire” was *intentional* deception in the case of Sima Qian, against the received view on the contrary. But, Peach argued, that view comes from focusing on a single chapter in the *Shi ji*, abstracted from the rest of the book. Now, *whichever stand one may take* on such an issue reserved for specialists (those in ancient history like Peach), it is true (and this fully justifies Peach’s endeavor) that the *Shi ji* was *indeed actually* interpreted for centuries as a sign of *support* for *laissez faire* economic policies existing within the Chinese tradition. Wartime as well as times of peace succeeded each other and political actors changed according to great new challenges to face, new empires to stabilize, and so on. Issues and options mentioned above remained and shaped a mindset where more recent doctrines that favored either control or openness of trade relationships would have to be inserted in turn. As a consequence, it may be “too good to be true” when one refers to ideas from classical China with contemporary doctrines in mind.

In this perspective, endeavors to bring forth a *comparative* history of economic thought are meaningful and useful. Thus Bertram Schefold (2016) reads the *Yan tie lun*, the record of a dialogue bearing on economics, a record of the “dispute about salt and iron”⁴). Schefold asks how this may contribute to our understanding of the history of the economic thought of the Han period *with the purpose* of comparing these writings with the pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica*, for instance. To which extent is it possible to draw a parallel between Chinese and Western economic ideas in many ways *and from their inception*? That indispensable study is the center of our concern beyond *clichés* one meets in the literature. The point is to discover where Chinese and Western perspectives diverge (like Schefold does, for example 2016: 360-365).

One must grasp Chinese reactions to the introduction of Western notions. The expressions of the reception of knowledge varied between endorsement of new doctrines or “Modernization” and their rejection, since this was regarded as “Westernization”. Western disciplines were either adopted with new words coined to display them or rebuked together with the corresponding concepts half-translated. Head-on confrontation existed, although issues were more often put slantwise, hinting at them yet also hiding a fundamentally anti-foreign bias.

Such debates ran high for decades among Chinese academics. Around 1900, for instance, the traditionalist Zeng Guofan, the reformist Kang Youwei, and the neo-Confucianist Zhang Junmai fought high and low. A downright proponent of Western science, Hu Shi hosted John Dewey (whom he had had

4) A cohort of Confucian *literati* argued against a high-ranking government official Sang Hongyang (of legalist bent) and a group of sixty *literati* or scholars from all over China, mostly Confucians. The meeting was held in 81 B.C. in the presence of the Emperor and was reported by Huan Kuan years later.

as a professor in New York) touring China for months beginning in May 1919 (see below). Hu Shi played a crucial role in spreading “liberal” ideas in Interwar China before taking refuge in Taiwan. Some of the most influential Chinese intellectuals from the 1880s to the 1930s visited Japan and from there some also went to Britain and to continental Europe or to America. Either directly or indirectly, they introduced modern thought into China by translating works into Chinese. In Japan, they often stayed in Kobe, Yokohama, Tokyo (where they would often meet more Westerners) or Kyoto. Before World War I, some favored Germany or Austria, since they felt conservative, while liberals favored the UK, the US or France. Top academic institutions were targeted, and revolutionaries forged strong ties with social-democratic (Marxist) parties, but there was more at large interest for all political parties and socio-economic views.

Whatever the socio-political side the protagonists chose, the issue was how to *transfer* knowledge. In order to gather such information and see how adoption/adaptation of science happened in China, many sources are required: textbooks, translations of Western books, adapted abstracts that disseminated ideas. One may also mirror effects, such as when European visions of East Asian economies were introduced elsewhere in Asia or locally adapted versions of Western ideas were read in turn by Westerners who had come to Eastern Asia. Economic discourse interplays are often surprising, and the making of identities is a result of such intercourse, one that may involve many economic topics: money and credit, institutions, policy, instability and so on.

Textbooks are good and very useful tools with which to examine that issue. They are examples of publications contributing to carrying all currents of thought, from liberalism to collectivism. Inasmuch as Chinese scholars played the role of cultural intermediaries, Chinese economic development also benefitted from the opening and, more at large, most Chinese contemplated paths to re-conquer independence from the Western powers. Japan had learned first from the West and become so powerful that its victory over was overwhelming in 1895.

The echo that translations had are tokens for evident interest in making China. Chinese translations often came through Japan, from transcriptions of English texts sometimes already translated from another European language (most often German or French). With such a chain of translations and interpretations, it is obvious that much original meaning was lost in translation. Losses and/or changes in contents were the inevitable collateral damage to adaptation in the language. But there was more: adaptation to the local conceptual framework was also considerably changing the contents, often leaving not very much from the original untouched. A Western reader is often surprised by what got through this process to the final Chinese reader, albeit an erudite scholar. As the meaning conveyed through translations originated in the West, it still offered a deep insight and alternative to genuine Chinese ways of thinking – especially in circumstances when the Chinese had lacked an evolution toward so-called “modernity” for centuries. Chinese “intellectuals,” then, sought less to adopt or to reject science altogether, than to revive some Chinese ‘spiritual’ heritage. Western ideas were considered for the contribution or for the damage they could bring to it. Conservative scholars as well as revolutionaries (most of whom would espouse Marxism under Soviet influence) sought to insert Western sciences within this heritage. There is no idea the Chinese would not try to use pragmatically. Western ‘metaphysics’, whose divine Christian background is so obviously foreign to Chinese traditions, were dissected in search

of possible reconcilable tenets. “Philosophy” was thus imported. Volumes were translated into Chinese, sometimes via the series of translations in various languages already mentioned. Ideas were disseminated, but in a specific way. This necessary step for the adaptation/adoption process of new ideas went as far as retaining new views of the world that were never meant by the original authors. Examples are numerous – I have already mentioned Hu Shi (1891-1962) introducing American pragmatist Dewey. Young scholars eager to spread new ideas concentrated at Beijing University (*Beijing Daxue* or *Beida*), where they were benevolently directed by the open-minded Cai Yuanpei. Clearly one would hope the same to hold nowadays, at a much larger scale but under the same inspiration.

To conclude this plea for a comparative history of thought, especially economic thought, we shall mention one debate that presents symmetric approaches between the communitarian scholar of the present-day revival of neo-Confucianism, Daniel A. Bell, and the individualistic approach stressed by Gilles Campagnolo. Potential debates emerge today from those new re-orientations. Apparently they set examples for observing the behavior of Chinese rulers between re-enacting traditional Confucian views and gradually letting some process of individualization occur. Bell lives and teaches in China and he argues for a renewed communitarianism on a multicultural basis⁵⁾. He asserts the “Neo-Confucian” genuine revival⁶⁾ that re-enacts a powerful system of elite selection via academic examination, one of the most traditional features in China. This approach combines inspirations complementing each other in the frame of Bell’s works (Bell 2006, 2010 and 2015). Our approach is exactly the opposite: Campagnolo (2013, 2016a, 2016b) questions East Asia about its symmetric conceptual traits to European systems⁷⁾.

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- 5) Daniel Bell has modeled his views, on the one hand, on his original multicultural experience in Canada, where he comes from, and, on the other hand, Lee KuanYew’s Singapore, where Bell could see communitarian ruling enacted in the last decades.
- 6) One must not mistake this *present-day* re-utilization of Confucian ideas, and what is traditionally called “Neo-Confucianism” in China, that is to say an idealistic, almost mystical view of Confucianism that one may trace back to Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (王守仁, 1471-1528). That tradition contributed much to convincing Chinese elites of their national superiority (精神文化, *jingshenwenhua*) over any foreign civilization, *a fortiori* once again the materialistic West (物质文化, *wuzhi wenhua*).
- 7) Campagnolo began with a very different standpoint from Bell, by making his case against both classical political economy and the nineteenth-century German critique of the latter in order to push Central European modernization (during the years of the nineteenth century known as the *Gründerjahre*). We deal with these issues from an economic philosophy standpoint, with a special interest in the process of Japanese modernization, naturally keeping regional debates in mind.

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