



Contexts and Issues of Contemporary Political Philosophy in China

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Part 1: A Conceptual Scheme of Political Philosophy

Political philosophy begins with any systematic reflection on the existing political practices, and yet requires something more than this. Since any persisting political practice both originated from a specific culture of the past and will also shape a stable but alterable culture in the future, through its own character in interaction with other cultures, political philosophers should, on the one hand, open a wider horizon than just focusing on political ideas stemming from a certain form of culture, and on the other hand, push a deeper perspective than just sticking to the questionable belief in the incomparability of different political cultures.

As a normative reflection, political philosophy should take the responsibility of evaluating and even criticizing the existing political policies, political institutions, political ideas, and political cultures. As a normative ideal, political philosophy should provide a coherent theoretical basis for contemporary criticisms as well as guidelines for future political reform or revolution. As a highly self-conscious discipline, political philosophy should be sincerely and systematically self-reflective in order to prevent the generation of unintentional social tragedy from the pursuit of morally desirable but culturally unacceptable or socially and economically infeasible political ideals.

Thus, the projects of political philosophy should develop in the following three directions, in not separate but inter-related ways, in order to answer the most important questions. First, what sorts of political conceptions are morally desirable, either universally or in specific contexts of culture and history? Second, can a morally desirable political conception be accepted or take root in a specific cultural context, if not, why? Third, are morally desirable and culturally acceptable political conceptions socially and economically feasible within the specific circumstances of a society, if not, why?

Because those questions are interrelated, a sound answer to one of these questions is likely to contribute to the understanding of the others. In this way, any political conception should be assessed in three dimensions: the dimensions of moral desirability, cultural acceptability, and socio-economic feasibility. Any initially plausible conception of

political philosophy that is constructed in one dimension is answerable to questions arising from the other two dimensions.

So interpreted, political philosophy might seem to be a project not only without a determinate terminus, but also without a positive starting point. But even if political philosophy is an endless enterprise, carried forward by the change and conflict of human society, we can still find some starting points for our reflections. Because political philosophy has developed and is developing all the time, we should not ask where to find a starting point, but given many existing starting points, we should ask which of them are the most appropriate.

Although moral desirability, cultural acceptability and social and economic feasibility are three indispensable dimensions for any reasonable political conception, political philosophy may well start with moral reflections on existing political ideas and the corresponding basic political structures. Two reasons can be provided for this priority of moral considerations. First, political philosophy began with moral reflections or moral justification concerning existing political structures in the context of established cultural, social and economic conditions. Thus, moral reflections gained *de facto* priority in political philosophy over other considerations.

Second, although it is necessary to question the acceptability and feasibility of morally desirable political conceptions, we need not uphold a morally undesirable political conception solely because it is acceptable and feasible within a certain cultural and socio-economic context. This is true even if we still have to settle our entitlement to make a moral judgement in abstraction from the cultural and historical context of the political conception that we are judging. We might still follow our reasoning on the assumption of this entitlement. What is really important is that we have reason to use the moral dimension as a starting point even though no starting point is immune from further reflection in the three inter-related dimensions of assessment.

Once we concentrate on the moral dimension, we will face another puzzle: Where should we begin our reflection among the many conflicting moral values in political philosophy? It is often claimed that with the development of political arguments, people with different political ideals will eventually find an impasse that obstructs any further advancement. These final conflicts will arise among supporters of ultimate ideals, such as liberty, equality, justice, rights, the common good, the greatest happiness for the members of society or the development of society. In such conflicts, people with different ideals seem to have two options: that is, either ending the debate with a precarious compromise that does not appeal to further unifying principles, or continuing to debate without any hope of reaching a further reasoned consensus.

But these two pessimistic alternatives depend on a methodological assumption of foundationalism. On this view, values are ultimate or foundational because they are the separate foundations on which different systems of political philosophy are established. If these foundations conflict, it seems impossible for the systems built on them to be compatible. I suggest that to break the impasse, we should understand the methodology of political philosophy as differing from the foundationalist approach.

First, the reasoning of political philosophy or any normative study cannot be confined to deductive reference. The supposedly ultimate values are not axioms on which deductive systems are established according to rules of deduction. Rather, the reasoning of political philosophy is a matter of reasonable interpretation and reasonable justification rather than deductive proof. Any of the supposedly ultimate value needs to be interpreted against the background of other supposedly ultimate values and other aspects of morality, and with the development of the interpretation, those other values must be brought into relation within a

theoretical whole that is judged, at least in part, by its coherence.

Even then, there are likely to be many competing theories. Each of them will be a coherent and a normatively normative interpretive system rather than a deductive foundationist system, and each of them can select and accommodate the mentioned supposedly ultimate values in its own way. How then can we decide which system is the most morally desirable one? If there is no way out, the move from foundationalism has no advantages and we are stuck with irreconcilable differences. We can solve this problem, I propose, by appealing to Rawls' s idea of "reflective equilibrium" as the second aspect of an appropriate methodology.

According to Rawls, "The most reasonable political conception for us is the one that best fits all our considered convictions on reflection and organizes them into a coherent view", and reflective equilibrium of this kind "meets the need for a basis of public justification" on questions of political conception. (Rawls 2001, 31-32) Resort to considered convictions provides tentatively fixed points, but allows theories and moral intuitions in principle to be mutually revisable. In this way, reflective equilibrium breaks through the deadlock among rival coherent theories.

In short, any plausible political theory mainly concerning moral desirability must meet two criteria. First, it should accommodate as many as possible of the supposedly ultimate values and interpret them as far as possible in an inter-related way. Second, it should accommodate our considered convictions in political field as well as in the field of general morality and structure these moral intuitions in a coherent whole.

Rawls hopes that the reflective equilibrium reached in his theory can also be accepted by his reflective readers. In regard to his theory of justice, Rawls hopes that the reader who wants to reach a "wide reflective equilibrium" "has considered the leading conceptions of political justice found in our philosophical tradition". (ibid, 31) Here, what Rawls actually means by "our philosophical tradition" is "Western philosophical tradition".

This suggests two possibilities. First, if persons in different traditions select a similar reflective equilibrium for a certain political theory, then the theory is more morally convincing than one that is selected only in a single tradition. Second, if persons in different traditions reach different or opposing results of reflection for the same theory, then either the theory is not universally convincing or the considered convictions formed in different traditions are not in line with the universal theory. Whatever the result, a "wider reflection" drawn from different traditions, is both a necessary test for any promising theory and a valuable basis for assessing the different traditions. The burden and responsibility of wider reflection should lead persons to a wider horizon than that confined to the political ideals of a certain philosophical or cultural tradition.

If the idea of wider reflection is reasonable and can be combined with the three dimensions of assessing any political conception, then a third methodological point can be expressed in the following way.

Assuming that the moral desirability of a political conception originating from a certain tradition has been established through reflective equilibrium by members of that tradition, the cultural acceptability of the conception to members of that tradition is still to be determined. Suppose that the morally desirable conception is culturally unacceptable because members of a society hold conflicting moral beliefs that are embedded in different aspects of the culture. In that case, the tension between the dimension of moral desirability and the dimension of cultural acceptability has moral significance. Either the reached reflective equilibrium for the endorsed theory is not wide enough to consider other moral beliefs in the same cultural tradition and should be revised or the other aspects of the culture should be revised in the line of the endorsed theory. This latter choice is possible in some cases, but

in others the culture cannot reasonably be altered to reduce moral conflict with the preferred theory and wider reflection will lead to changing the theory rather than changing the culture.

A political conception, even if it is both morally desirable and culturally acceptable, may lack social and economic feasibility. The realm of “ought” is not always consistent with the realm of “is”: the laws of society and economics are different from the laws of morality and culture. If conflict among the three dimensions cannot be resolved, and if any sound political conception must incorporate reflections along these three dimensions, then the original moral desirability of the specific conception will be challenged from the other dimensions.

Even if we assume that a political conception originating in a tradition has harmonized moral desirability, cultural acceptability and social and economic feasibility in that tradition, the requirement of wider reflection still asks us to test that conception against a wider background of different traditions. In doing so, there are three possible outcomes. First, wider consideration might break the harmony of the conception within its home tradition, because a wider cultural and moral horizon might show that the moral desirability of the conception is grounded on an understanding of human values that is too narrow. Second, wider reflection might confirm the original harmony of the conception and help to justify its universality. Third, the original harmony might be largely limited to its specific tradition, with other traditions finding their own ways to the ideal of harmonizing the three dimensions.

I contend that testing political conceptions by reflection along the three dimensions of moral desirability, cultural acceptability and social and economic feasibility within a tradition and by wider reflection against background of different traditions are both necessary for the development of political philosophy. I also predict that combining the two kinds of extended reflection, as the third point of the methodology, will generate important issues that have not been discussed before. Interaction between the two kinds of reflection will complicate political philosophy, but in ways that will allow our reflection on political conceptions to become more comprehensive. In particular, it will allow us to understand the complicated realities of political ideals and human values in more appropriate ways. Of course, the idea of comprehensive reflection does not mean that we cannot find starting points for the whole enterprise of political philosophy. Rather, the variety of possible starting points and theories make comprehensive reflection both necessary and possible.

Will new issues and new political theories be proposed on the basis of comprehensive reflection? Will supporters of new political theories reach reflective equilibrium through comprehensive reflection? Will new political theories with a wider horizon and deeper perspective contribute to the whole realm of political philosophy? Answers to these questions, I think, largely depend on how political philosophers with different traditions develop their mutual understandings. As one of the great cultures of the world, Chinese tradition of thought, I hope, can make special contribution to the development of political philosophy, and Chinese political philosophers can join in this development.

Part 2: Contexts of Realities

If the conceptual scheme interpreted in the last section about the projects and methodology of political philosophy is meaningful, we may use it to locate the issues of contemporary political philosophy in China. By the word “contemporary”, I mean the time since the 1990s

to the present. An important fact that should be kept in mind is that in the period between 1979, when the economic reform began, and 1989, when the democratic movement failed, although there was an outcry for political reform and a general atmosphere of theoretical prosperity, systematic reflections on different political ideas did not begin. Only in the 1990s, with a rapid process of marketization stimulated by the state and a loosening of ideological regulation, was a social and economical background appropriate for discussing political ideas established. Against this background appeared liberal thought.

One prominent mark of liberalism since the 1990s is its reflection on the limits of morally justified state intervention in the society. The moral reflection itself expressed the unusual phenomenon of the formation of a civil society with an emphasis on the private property rights and other supervening rights of its members. So from its start, liberal thought differed from even the most radical political thought before 1989, which asked only for democracy and the separation of powers in order to prevent government corruption. Once questions concerning the moral desirability of a limited state are proposed, questions concerning the moral meaning of democracy will naturally follow. Since a democratic state is still a state, if the state cannot cross its moral limits, then democracy must also have its limits.

The moral reflection on democracy itself is the watershed of the development of political thought in modern China. With this reflection, liberals realized that the goal of democracy is more than -- or other than -- simply rule by the will of majority. On this basis, liberals begin to reflect on the failed democratic movement and the ideas underlying it. By learning from the works of extremely prominent Western liberals of the twentieth century, such as Hayek, these Chinese liberals gradually concluded that democracy is at most a means to the end of individual liberty. So if a democratic movement does not promote the realization of individual liberty, it cannot be justified. They also saw that the realization of individual liberty requires the gradual development of civil society as its seedbed. Since the radical democratic movement of 1989 lacked the appropriate civil society to accommodate it and lacked deeper principles to support it, the above conclusion suggests that those liberals should reject this form of democracy. Considering that the target of the democratic movement of 1989 was totalitarianism, which is the greatest enemy of liberalism, the conclusion drawn by those liberals -- including those who showed great enthusiasm for the democracy movement only years before -- looks like a paradox.

Once liberals concluded that the liberal ideal can only be realized on the precondition of the development of a civil society, which requires a civil order gradually forming from a deepening market process rather than a radical revolution, they faced a dilemma. Because the market process is mainly stimulated and fostered by the state, these liberals are bound to exhibit a conflicting character. On the one hand, they might radically promote any means to deepen the privatization that opposed the socialist ideal that legitimized the current regime. On the other hand, they might conservatively emphasize the importance of the state in keeping social order and deepening privatization.

At least in appearance, the conservative side of those liberals can easily be confused with the view of other theorists, known as New Authoritarians, who support the use of strong measures by the state to keep social order. The New Authoritarians believe that democracy is not an appropriate option for a Chinese society that continues to be shaped by traditional political culture. But these liberals, although exhibiting a conservative trait, argue that there is a crucial distinction between liberals who support a seemingly conservative approach and conservatives who lack liberal ideas. They argue that a real liberal must conserve not the illiberal traditional culture, but the social seedbed for the realization of liberal ideals, especially the means to develop a civil society and private property ownership. Following Hayek, these liberals regard the eighteenth century English conservative Burke as an authentic liberal and ground their theory on their understanding of this Western thought.

And yet the social, economic, historical and cultural context of contemporary China are quite different from the British or American conditions in which liberal thought took root.

Once the classical Western liberal ideas were accepted in the Chinese contexts, the dilemma that their Chinese proponents have to face emerged. If the state fosters the dynamics of market, if market is the only way to achieve the gradual formation of a civil society and if the formation of civil society requires a secure social order, then the authoritarian order guaranteed by the power of the state is exactly the bridge needed to the liberal order guaranteed by the awakening of the civil society. But this assumes that the state-guaranteed market process will strengthen civil society while at the same time weakening state power, eventually to allow a clear demarcation between the state and society and a transition from authoritarian to liberal rule. But this assumption is far from being proven.

Besides, liberals of this kind have not given a satisfactory explanation of why the individual liberty that they cherish must be the only morally desirable ultimate value. They regard individual liberty as the foundation to explain other values, such as equality and justice, or as the weapon to deconstruct other values, such as community and nationalism. They interpret equality as equality of freedom from interference and to interpret justice as a pure procedure rather than as substantive justice. They are skeptical about any idea of the common good or any nationalist movement. So although they prefer authoritarian order to radical disorder as an expedient to achieve individual liberty and strongly support the market and privatization simulated by the state, they are critical of any positions conflicting with their faith in liberty. Because they put individual liberty in the prime position and endorse unrestricted market freedom, people in this camp, although they call themselves liberals, are actually libertarians.

Quite differently from the Western historical context of the rise of classical liberalism, contemporary Chinese marketization does not form itself spontaneously, but is rather stimulated and regulated by the state. In the process of state-supported marketization, the totalitarian state has gradually transformed itself into an authoritarian state by loosening its regulation of some aspects of society, but at the same time the state and society are intertwined in a more complicated way than in the totalitarian socialist era. Before economic reform, society was an arena in which the economic plans of central government were carried out. But now society, with its economic dynamics, has become an arena in which all levels of government both provide policy support and gain economic benefits. Since the whole economic reform is largely policy-oriented, enterprises with different kinds of ownership seeking market success have to win policies favoring themselves. Governments and enterprises thus gradually develop a mutually dependent relationship, in which the problem of corruption becomes more deeply entrenched and more difficult to overcome.

In the meantime, the income gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged has greatly widened through the combined effects of market competition, unfair opportunity and corruption. The growing power of interest groups increases not only this income gap but also the unfair distribution of opportunities, and this in turn has deeply affected the expectations of people in different social positions. Because of the impact of economical inequality and unfairness of opportunities, the prospects of the younger generation are heavily determined by their non-chosen social backgrounds. As a result, the social unity once guaranteed by socialist equality is under serious threat. Since the official socialist ideology of common prosperity is in sharp contrast to the reality of social inequalities, the delay of profound political reform means that official propaganda is less able than before to persuade people on moral grounds to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of social duties. In addition, with the development of consumerism, market values further diminish the moral persuasiveness of official ideology and also threaten other traditional moral values necessary to maintain social solidarity.

But although the regime's legitimacy, formerly founded on the ideal of socialist equality, is now diminishing, a new basis of legitimacy has been established, based on the rapid growth of the nation's economy. The fundamental economic policy of the central government now gives priority to economic efficacy over distributive justice, and this policy is widely supported by the people, even those who have profited less by economical reform. Two points help to explain this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon. First, even in this market era, traditional Chinese morality, which gives priority to the common good over individual good, is still alive. Even with serious state violations of human rights, which impair the prestige of the government in the minds of a critical public, nationalism remains an effective means to keep people united in support of economic development as well as in dealing with natural disasters or pressures from the outside world. Second, although there are serious negative social consequences of the growth of economy, most people still welcome the positive and obvious social benefits, including an enhanced standard of living, a relaxation of the regulation of ideas and the reform of certain spheres of governmental institutions and the juridical system.

In short, the reality of contemporary China is a complex mixture, in which problems and hopes are intertwined and optimism and pessimism co-exist. Within this puzzling social, economical and political context, the ongoing debates in political philosophy are also complicated. Some of these debates concern the analysis of the current situation of China from different perspectives, while others concern more abstract political ideas. Some debates concern the moral desirability of certain ideas, while others concern problems of cultural acceptability and social and economical feasibility. As a result, debates between the liberals and the New Left reflect this complex reality as well as embodying intellectual efforts to understand and transform this reality.

Part 3: The Theoretical Structure of the Ongoing Debates

Although there is a crucial distinction between libertarianism and liberal egalitarianism, Chinese political theorists usually use "liberalism" for both. This is true for the liberals as well as for their opponents -- New Left theorists. One explanation for this phenomenon is that, as two closely related theories both originated from the West, the difference between the two schools can only clearly emerge in the context under which the basic liberties are guaranteed by constitutional principles and the democratic mechanisms. But the situation in contemporary China is quite different. While basic liberties are the common goal of the "liberals", further differences between libertarians and liberal egalitarians are blurred. Since my aim is to interpret the debates between the liberals and the new Left, I will follow contemporary Chinese usage and use "liberalism" in a broader sense.

Overall, Chinese liberals have two grounds for their ideas. They establish their own positions by studying liberal ideas of the West and by appealing to their considered convictions about the political and social realities of contemporary China. By studying western liberal theories, they are persuaded by the moral desirability of liberal ideals. By reflecting on reality, they believe that according to liberal criteria there are great political and social injustices in the present system. They use liberal conceptual schemes to criticize the existing political and social realities and propose changes to overcome their faults.

Liberals strongly criticize the political corruption and argue that the main cause for corruption is the lack of a real market and real free competition. They do not criticize the

marketization that has been initially stimulated by the state, but they begin to question the assumption that state-fostered marketization will generate a healthy market. As a consequence, they propose to expel political power from the market by deepening economic reform and by initiating political reform. As for political reform, liberals are anxious to promote liberal ideas such as the rule by law, the mechanism of checks and balance, the constitutional protection of private ownership rights and the establishment of basic individual liberties. In promoting the separation of the state from the market, fair opportunities for individuals and individual liberties protected by further political reform, liberals believe that through the gradual solution of the problem of corruption, the income gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged will be narrowed.

Liberals also criticize the idea of a perfectionist state, since they believe any perfectionist idea, such as socialism, will tend to lead to "the road to serfdom". They oppose the intervention of the state in the cultural marketplace, as they oppose the state's use of official ideology to interfere with the free publication of different ideas. Because liberals do not believe that a public ranking of the personal conceptions of the good can be justified, they focus on the establishment of public procedures to protect private rights, including the right to hold and advertise different understandings of the good. In short, Chinese liberals, like their Western predecessors, endorse a neutral state and believe that only by combining the neutrality of the state with free market competition can a society finally break away from the threat of totalitarianism. Chinese liberals believe that only in this way can individual liberties be protected and the values of individuals be fully esteemed. They endorse individualism according to which individuals are the ultimate creators and bearers of human values and hold that other values, such as the values of community and society, should be founded on or derived from the value of individual liberties. Thus, individual liberties are the ultimate value: they not only support other human values but also make them possible.

As the opponents of the liberals, New Left theorists get their name because they try to justify some socialist ideas from new perspectives that differ from the perspectives of traditional socialists. New Left theorists think that even if one specific path to socialism is unacceptable, the core idea of socialism can still be accepted. Liberals regard the unsatisfactory political structure as the main cause of the severe social problems that have arisen in the process of marketization, while New Left theorists give more weight to intrinsic problems of the market. New Left theorists are more skeptical of the advantages of the market than liberals, just as liberals are more skeptical than New Left theorists about the role of the state.

First, New Left theorists do not believe that a free market structured by just procedural regulations can spontaneously generate social justice. When referring social justice, New Left theorists reject the idea that any outcome of market competition regulated by pure procedural justice is bound to be just. Here, New Left theorists strongly support the demands of distributive justice, but liberals argue that implementing distributive justice through the intervention of the state would threaten individual liberties. This is also a focus of debate between liberal egalitarians and libertarians in the West. The New Left's emphasis on distributive justice does not necessarily distinguish it from liberalism, since Rawlsian liberalism also emphasizes the justification of constraining distributive justice through the difference principle. As a consequence, Chinese liberals should see that when they oppose every position of the New Left, they might also oppose the position of Rawlsian liberalism that differs from libertarianism.

The New Left's second view on the market distinguishes it clearly from liberalism, in both the narrower and the broader sense. Even liberals who deny that the market is intrinsically just still argue for the neutrality of the state. But New Left theorists reject the cultural marketplace protected by state neutrality as an arena to preserve and develop human values.

New Left theorists argue that the market mechanism tends to homogenize human values and thus undermines the promise of liberal state neutrality to protect a pluralism of values. They also argue that the values that win the free competition of the cultural marketplace are not necessarily better than the values that lose the competition. On the contrary, many good values or valuable conceptions of the good are wiped out rather than preserved. If the principle of state neutrality cannot preserve these valuable conceptions of the good, how can it reasonably be justified?

The liberals certainly disagree with these claims. They might argue that, even if these observations of the New Left were true, the outcome of competition regarding values and conceptions of the good is still the result of people's choice through the exercise of their individual freedom or autonomy. Since the New Left observations are intended to provide grounds for criticizing the liberal principle of state neutrality, liberals can thus challenge New Left theorists to propose further grounds if they wish to reject state neutrality. But even if liberals are not convinced by the proposed argument against state neutrality, the New Left argument still has some consequences for the liberal position. The question of proving the consequences of state neutrality is largely an empirical one, while the New Left proposals are essentially normative. So if it were true that free competition in the marketplace would homogenize pluralistic values and that inferior conceptions of the good would replace superior conceptions, the liberal answer would not satisfy the normative demands of the New Left to protect superior conceptions of the good.

As the opponents of liberals, Chinese New Left theorists often endorse any plausible position to criticize liberalism, including views taken from Marxism, communitarianism and Chinese traditional thought. Following communitarians, they argue that if liberals cherish the values of individual choice as the symbol of individual freedom or autonomy, they should act to encourage and preserve as many options for individuals as possible. For if the competition of the marketplace leads to increasingly fewer options of the valuable conceptions of the good, the concept of individual choice or autonomy will become empty. If individuals want to be the creators of values, they must first receive and bear values protected and preserved by principles other than state neutrality.

New Left theorists argue that the principle of state neutrality must be grounded on a misunderstanding of the relationship between individuals and society. Liberals believe that free and equal individuals under the rule by law will naturally form various social unions that provide the bases of the whole society, so the values of individuals are prior to the values of community or society. Through the inheritance of a Hegelian holistic view of the society, New Left theorists hold that individuals are embedded in the traditions of a certain culture and society, although individuals have the freedom to reject the inherited elements of their tradition. What the New Left theorists emphasize is that a certain culture is the basis for individuals born in that culture properly to understand the relationship between individuals and the common tradition. Only with this prior understanding, New Left theorists argue, can individuals in a certain cultural tradition understand themselves and the full meaning of their individual freedom. So New Left theorists believe that if we really want to protect individual freedom, we should understand freedom as extending beyond freedom from the interference of the state. If true individual freedom can only originate from a specific culture in which individuals are born and educated, then the state must have the responsibility of protecting the most valuable elements of the cultural tradition and, more particularly, must recognize that the cultural tradition would be threatened by the homogenizing effect of the market operating under a regime of state neutrality.

Chinese liberals oppose this perfectionist proposal not only on the basis of their commitment to the idea of negative freedom but also on the basis of their commitment to liberal justice. Liberals believe that if the state privileges some conceptions of the good over others and thus distributes more social resources to promote these privileged conceptions, the state is

unfair to those people whose life prospects are based on other conceptions of the good. This would violate the principle of justice as fairness.

New Left theorists reject this accusation and argue that liberals are wrong to equate promoting more valuable conceptions of the good with promoting unfairness and injustice. New Left theorists may admit that a non-neutral state will distribute more social resources to support what it takes to be more valuable conceptions of the good. But promoting better conceptions of the good for the society only means protecting better options for individuals who will choose their ways of life in the society. Doing so is also good for individuals who do not choose the state-sponsored conceptions of the good, since only in the comparison with publicly endorsed conceptions of the good can an alternative conception truly reveal its value for specific individuals. Promoting the more valuable conceptions of the good for the society is both just and fair. Besides, the rankings of different conceptions of the good and the corresponding distribution of resources can be integrated into democratic procedures, and the idea of democracy can be further integrated into a specific cultural tradition.

It is clear that New Left theorists support not only a perfectionist idea of the state, but also support a perfectionist idea of democracy. They reject the conception of democracy as at most a means to the end of individual liberty having instrumental value, but no intrinsic value. On the contrary, New Left theorists hold that the value of democracy lies in individuals freely weighing different conceptions of the good through public deliberative participation rather than merely in aggregating votes for pre-existing private preferences. So democracy cannot be understood simply as an instrument to protect private lives; rather, democracy must function positively to influence and shape people's private lives without arbitrarily interfering with them. New Left theorists do not oppose the proper distinction between social life and personal life, but they clearly oppose the liberal distinction between political life and social life. They especially fear that capitalist market values would come to permeate the whole of society structured by an anti-perfectionist state.

Like liberals, the New Left theorists recognize the power of marketization to shape the society. But there is a great difference between the liberal and New Left assessments of the consequences. The liberals welcome the positive influence of the market on transforming the totalitarian political structure and establishing civil society. They justify the intrinsic legitimacy of market freedom on the basis of their understanding of individual liberties and human values in general. In contrast, New Left theorists are alert to the negative effect of the market and anti-perfectionist democracy on the civil society and the state. Further, they are critical of the supposed justice of a capitalist market system. Following the Marxist tradition, New Left theorists believe that the whole capitalist productive mode is grounded on exploitation and selfishness. Since liberalism provides moral justification for the essentially immoral practices of exploitation and selfishness, how can a commitment to liberal justice provide a basis for society?

We can see that there is undeniably a deep theoretical gap between liberals and the New Left. When these opposing theorists use their own conceptual schemes to analyze the realities of contemporary China, the differing conclusions not only reflect the differences between their conceptual schemes but also strengthen and widen their differences.

Part 4: The Prospect of Political Philosophy in China

The debates between Chinese liberals and New Left theorists in the context of contemporary China have not transcended the conceptual schemes provided by the Western contemporary

political philosophers. But their debates do not merely duplicate those of their Western colleagues or merely import and advertise different foreign political ideas in China. Most of those involved in the debates are motivated by their concerns for the realities and history of their own country. When they borrow the conceptual schemes of Western political philosophers and apply them to the problems of their own country, they contribute to the understanding of the specific context-oriented problems. If there is real development in their understanding, then this development will in turn contribute to further understanding of Chinese realities and to the further construction of conceptual schemes that originated in the context of Western history, culture and society.

And yet one related debate concerns the possibility of any universal political conceptions. Liberals believe that the conception of liberal justice is universal and independent of the concrete contexts of a specific culture and history. Although this conception originated in the context of Western societies, they hold that liberal justice has universal significance and should be accepted as the basis of political principles. It is the embodiment of these liberal principles, rather than the principles themselves, that requires specific studies of different political cultures and traditions. Since most Chinese liberals believe that the Chinese political tradition has developed in a way that opposes the liberal ideal, one of their main tasks is to criticize this tradition according to liberal criteria. Since many Chinese liberals deny that the Chinese political tradition has aspects that provide access to liberal principles, they suggest transforming the current political structure by learning from the successful institutional constructions of Western countries. Only in this way, they argue, can the main political problems of China be solved and the related social problems be relieved.

The New Left theorists criticize this liberal position as the “fetishism of institutions” and as historically naive. They argue that any institutions must have the corresponding cultural seedbed just as any political ideas must have corresponding cultural origins. Liberals may agree with their opponents, but use this insight to insist on the need to cultivate the liberal seedbed as a basis for liberal ideas and institutions taking root. Liberals also consider the most appropriate political and social approach to reach liberal ends. But they still insist that the liberal ideal should be realized and that we should push China towards the realization of liberal ideals no matter how long or how hard the road to this end.

New Left theorists criticize this liberal position as that mistakenly endorsing “the end of history”. It is not clear that whether New Left theorists hold some universal political principles as rivals to universal liberal principles, but they clearly deny the universality of liberal principles. They argue that the liberal principle of state neutrality emerged in a specific historical context as the outcome of both Western religious conflicts and Western tensions between church and state. Only when liberalism became the orthodox ideology of the capitalism, and after capitalist acquisitiveness developed universally did liberalism as the outcome of a specific culture become regarded as a universal truth. So the Chinese liberals are wrong because they do not realize that the universal language of liberal ideals obscures the special essence of capitalist imperialism, which once took the form of weapons but now is clothed in cultural ideas.

Thus, the New Left theorists conclude that liberalism deliberately ignores or obliterates the equality of cultures in the name of the equality of individuals. They argue that the real equality of individuals across cultures requires as its precondition the recognition of the equality of cultures. While Chinese liberals generally have a positive attitude towards globalization and welcome China’s active part in this process, New Left theorists are highly suspicious of globalization. They worry that with the deepening of this capitalist globalization, which they see as the successor to capitalist acquisitiveness of earlier centuries, valuable cultural equality and cultural pluralism will be replaced by one

homogenizing capitalist culture in the name of liberalism and market value. If cultural pluralism is threatened, and if capitalist culture can only provide individuals with homogenized options in line with values selected through the market, liberalism will be self-defeating. Because what makes the principle of state neutrality justified is exactly the liberal goal of protecting pluralism and promoting as wide range of options of the conceptions of the good for individuals as possible. So understood by the New Left, economic globalization is dangerous rather than good.

Not only is globalization dangerous, New Left theorists believe, globalization is also unjust. They argue that globalization is only the globalization of exploitation, with developing countries being exploited by developed countries, proletarians being exploited by capitalists, nature being exploited by men. Liberals support globalization because they believe that mutual benefits come from mutual cooperation according to each country's comparative advantage. But New Left theorists argue that the rules for mutual cooperation in globalization cannot be just, because in establishing the rules for cooperation, some countries have unfair bargaining powers, which originated from historical patterns of injustice and which will perpetuate injustice in the future. Even if there is net growth of profits for each country under these unfair rules, the relative share of growth that each country obtains will also be unfair. Even if we ignore this unfairness between countries, the distribution of profits within each country will also be unjust because of the capitalist ownership in each country. Finally, because of the inherent character of acquisitiveness and greediness of the capitalist ownership, the global result is not only the grave poverty of the majority of the third world countries but also the fatal ruin of nature and the deterioration of the global environment. Convinced by their worries and speculations, some New Left theorist believe that only the movements of global democracy and even global cultural revolution can lead human beings out of the dangers of globalization.

It is not strange that liberals would criticize such New Left theorists for going too far with unrealistic theory and speculation. In contrast, Chinese liberals focus their attention mainly on how to transform the current political structure of China without bringing into their analysis the whole direction of capitalist civilization and the universality of liberalism. Quite interestingly, while Chinese liberals promote the transformation of the political structure of China in accordance with liberal ideas on the model of foreign institutional practices, New Left theorists accuse liberals as being unrealistic in their insensitivity to the specific cultural traditions of China. New Left theorists believe that the liberal ideal is not only morally undesirable but also culturally unacceptable. When the New Left Theorists emphasize this latter point, they advocate "innovation of institutions" rather than "fetishism of institutions". They seek the guidance of new principles as well as learning from the successful historical practices. But it is not clear what are the positive new principles of the New Left other than criticism of liberals, who actually hold quite clear political principles. As for some of the recent Chinese political and social practices endorsed by New Left theorists as successes, including some practices of the Cultural Revolution, the reliability of their assessment and their historical judgement is regularly rejected by liberals. Liberals argue either that the seemingly successful political and social practices are morally undesirable or that they were just successful in devastating the economy, culture or society. Here, it is worthwhile to emphasize again how differences of abstract conceptual schemes and the differences of concrete descriptions, interpretations and arguments are mutually influenced, mutually dependent and mutually strengthened.

In addition to theoretical complexity, the complex political realities of contemporary China also influence the further shaping of both liberal and New Left theoretical approaches. Since the most prominent theorists on both sides of the debate are all independent intellectuals who may criticize the official ideology directly or indirectly according to their own ideals, they normally do not have direct access to influence the direction of official politics. Unpredictable political and social changes of contemporary China, determined both

domestically and by international politics especially with the Western world, will either restrain the development of one or all of the theories or will drive development. It would be too optimistic to assume that this development will be healthy rather than damaging. If economic or social crises profoundly challenge the current socialist regime, then liberal thought will probably prevail, with some valuable ideas of the New Left being consciously ignored. If a strong nationalist movement emerges through conflicts between the current regime and the Western world, some ideas of the New Left will probably be widely absorbed among ordinary educated people, with liberal ideas being constrained by the nationalist atmosphere. Neither of these two possible developments would be good for the development of political philosophy and political institutions in China.

Though contemporary Chinese political philosophers cannot exert direct influence on the development of real politics, they can develop their theories and reflections on Chinese political and social transitions and continue to draw on the development of political ideas in the outside world and on the long Chinese political tradition. They can also attract more people to participate in rational reflection on political ideas and realities and thus use the transition of ideas indirectly to prepare for the transition of realities. But in doing so, they should try to develop mutual understandings between theorists of different schools. More importantly, they should collectively show the virtue of “public reasonableness” by listening seriously to the ideas of their opponents, including the ideas the listener may find strange or even obnoxious, and by being willing to set forth one’s own views intelligibly and candidly. (Kymlicka 2001, 289). Contemporary Chinese political philosophers should keep in mind that the virtue of public reasonableness they can show today is the same virtue that a democratic citizenship should display in the future. No matter how much they disagree over the real meaning of democracy, the establishment of a democratic citizenship is one of their common goals.

Given these considerations, Chinese liberals should go beyond proving the illegitimacy of the current socialist regime by the standard of liberalism. They should first prove that the liberal ideal is indeed morally desirable and is of universal significance. They should remember that their moral reflection is against the background of enduring Chinese culture, so their reflection must be wide enough to take into consideration their own great tradition. After the wider reflection, if they can really establish that traditional Chinese political culture is incompatible with liberalism, they should also determine whether there are any political values that are worth preserving from this specific cultural tradition.

If there are such values, liberals should explain how these political values might be incorporated within liberalism. Liberals should not only explain how a different political tradition can accommodate liberal values, but also explain what this means for the ongoing transformation of Chinese political practices. If important political values are not in line with liberalism, Chinese liberals should both deepen and widen their reflections to understand why those political values that are independent of liberal ideas and perhaps in conflict with them might be important either to the specific cultural tradition of their origin and to other traditions, including the liberal tradition. These lines of reflection may result in discoveries that Chinese liberals have not anticipated and may also make unexpected contributions to developing liberal thought.

If there are no political values worth preserving from Chinese tradition, Chinese liberals should concentrate not only on the moral desirability of liberal ideas but also consider another question: How should Chinese political practices and underlying political culture be guided into the path of liberalism? Are liberal ideas culturally acceptable in the foreseeable future? If so, how can a liberal approach be integrated with the considerations of social and economical feasibility? If not, are there tactical considerations that should allow liberals to endorse any non-liberal approach as a means of drawing near to the liberal ideal? Are there any limits to the range of non-liberal approaches that may be endorsed?

Reflections on these questions may not directly contribute to the development of liberal theories, but will certainly contribute to the practice of liberalism. Because practice is often the stimulus of theory, if the commitment of Chinese liberals to the universality of liberal ideals is fully justified, liberals may certainly make positive contributions to the political practice of contemporary China and might help to advance political philosophy throughout the world.

And yet, the development of liberal theory and practice is bound to face criticisms from the New Left, but it is far from sufficient for these theorists to act only as critics of liberal ideas. If they want to show that liberalism is not morally satisfactory, they must provide an alternative political conception that is morally preferable. If they want to justify a specific conception of socialism against capitalism, they must show that their preferred socialist approach can overcome those political problems especially attaching to former socialist practices and that their approach will not slide back again into “the road to serfdom” because it lacks social or economical feasibility. Rather than merely opposing liberal criticism of current political practices, New Left theorists should show why these criticisms are insufficient or inappropriate. They must do this in part by constructing their own positive political principles and develop an approach to justifying and implementing these principles. In short, they should construct their own political theory.

In constructing their own theory, New Left theorists should not simply reject the valuable convictions of liberals, but show what other considered convictions should also be taken into reflective consideration. New Left theorists cannot ignore the fact that the most appealing characteristic of liberalism is its specific conception of political and social justice. The New Left need not be satisfied with the liberal conception of justice, but they should admit that they share the pursuit of justice as a common ideal although with different interpretations. Once New Left theorists begin to meet this challenge, their conception of justice must accommodate the liberal values of rights, liberties and toleration. The New Left theorists may provide different interpretations and justifications of these values and even point out their limitations, but they cannot deny them a role in their own political theory.

Understood in this way, if any new theory will be born out of the tension between liberals and the New Left, it must differ from each of them in some crucial ways. The new theory must structure some of the most important values in a coherent whole, including the values of rights and duties, liberties and responsibilities, justice and the good, equality of individuals and equality of cultures, and democracy. In addition, the coherence of this theory must be established through comprehensive reflection on its moral desirability, cultural acceptability and social and economical feasibility. Such a theory will belong neither solely to the New Left nor solely to liberalism, but will be the outcome of sincere debate and mutual understanding between the two. Such a theory should be the collective contribution of Chinese thinkers to the development of political philosophy.

What is the candidate theory? The answer is not ready to be found, but given that Chinese political culture, with its perfectionist character and a humanist rather than a theological foundation, is the longest-lasting in the world, the candidate theory might provide a perfectionist conception of justice. If this possible political conception can satisfy the three-dimensional requirement of moral desirability, cultural acceptability and social and economical feasibility, it will surely be the fruit of both Chinese culture and world political philosophy.

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