
Chinese Political Theory in Dialogue with Rousseau

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Abstract: Within the vast body of scholarship on the Enlightenment, only a small portion addresses the role of China in the debates of that period. Among those, scarcely any concerns the relationship between China and Rousseau's thought. Yet the connections are many, and deep. This essay surveys a body of Chinese political theory available to Rousseau, then compares Rousseau's understanding of sovereignty, the "people," popular will, public opinion, and the authority of office, with comparable terms present in the Chinese theory available to him. The aim of this exercise is not so much to establish influence, though that can be difficult to deny. Primarily, the essay attempts to show that Rousseau's system generates contradictions in part because he attempts to combine parliamentary procedure with the conception of sovereignty and the popular will found in his Chinese sources.

Keywords: China, political theory, Rousseau, sovereignty, popular will, checks and balances, public opinion, corruption

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In his essay on "The Complexity of Difference," Zhang Longxi showed how trendy notions of cultural incommensurability have found "scientific" support in the theories of Thomas Kuhn. Just as different paradigms in science mark off incommensurate cognitive realms, so it is among distinct cultural traditions. Noting how readily this line of thought can devolve into tribalism he added:

It is ironic that cultural relativists, who maintain that language, cognition, and knowledge are all generated within the system of one culture and do not obtain across cultures, nonetheless claim to have cross-cultural knowledge about fundamentally different and incommensurable cultures. (343)

Professor Zhang went on to observe that there is always common ground. Without that, there would be no way to assert its absence. This seems evidently so, but then how is it that the perception of radical difference between China and "The West" remains? One reason is that the common ground, though present, is overlooked or dismissed. Another is that evidence for common values has been erased from the historical record. I will be attending to both matters and hope to show how an appreciation for common ground can also help us to appreciate genuine difference.

In the book *Dismantling White Privilege* Chandran Nair devoted an entire chapter to “laying out how history has been selectively interpreted to help create White privilege at the expense of others” (ch. 2). To paraphrase Nair’s argument, general history textbooks around the world leave the reader with the impression that all things good and noble were invented in the West. If this were the case, so be it, but it is not. Major concepts and institutions now regarded as distinctive of the West in fact were adapted from non-Western traditions, but evidence of such has been carefully expunged or minimized in Western Civilization textbooks.

As J. M. Blaut has shown, historians of Europe often deny influence from non-white nations and promote narratives of Western influence on areas outside of Europe and America (7-9). So ingrained is this bias that it has been encoded into library search engines. At the University of Michigan, I once searched “Western Civilization, Chinese influences,” but the system corrected my search, changing it to “Chinese Civilization, Western influences.” Although there is an extensive literature examining China’s impact on Western Civilization, the library system categorically denies its existence.

Like theories of incommensurability, the notion of influence is rooted in the idea of distinct cultural essences. This essay avoids that idea altogether. It assumes instead that common ground is more common than we imagine, and at times is inescapable. Those inescapable conditions are features of our shared human condition, what the literary giant Liu Zongyuan (773-819) called “the force of circumstance” (“势之来”). One of those inescapable forces is the need to conceptualize “authority,” as Liu, in fact, did. When Rousseau approached this topic, he adopted concepts made available in translation from Chinese texts. This prompted a dialogue of sorts between Rousseau and the followers of Mencius. Let us follow that dialogue and see where it goes.

Rousseau’s Selective Amnesia

The Enlightenment scholar Günther Lottes argues “Since the publication of Montesquieu’s masterpiece [*The Spirit of the Laws*] the perception of China had become a battleground for different conceptions of political authority within the Enlightenment” (76-77). Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Compact*, as the 1764 English edition rendered it, was one of many ambitious essays published at the time of that ongoing debate.¹ High school and college students learn to credit Rousseau with many of our most fundamental modern political concepts, including the sovereignty of the people, empathy for the vulnerable, and Western individualism. Yet anyone familiar with classical Chinese theory will recognize in Rousseau’s work multiple sentiments, principles, problematics, and terminology that can be found in translations of Chinese philosophy circulating at the time Rousseau wrote his seminal texts. Despite that fact, China was not referenced even once in Rousseau’s essay. This oversight on his part provides us with an opportunity to examine what might happen if translations of Chinese essays on governance were to be set in dialogue with the English language edition of Rousseau’s early work.

At the outset we should recognize that political theory in China enjoyed a complex history with multiple philosophical schools that interacted in complex ways over time. When I speak of “Chinese theory” here I will be referring to mainstream political thought as represented in those sources translated into French and English from the 17th through the late 18th centuries. This material consisted largely of Confucian classics such as the *Analects*, *Mencius* and the *Great Learning*, as well as Han and Song period edicts and policy documents written by famous statesmen.

Originally the latter had been privately selected and published in several collections during the Song period. In 1685, under the auspices of Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661-1722), several such collections were collated and republished as *The Mirror of Classical Literature* (古文渊鉴). This work contained essays touching on issues we would describe as political speech, conflicts of interest, equality under the law, and meritocratic administration. Emperor Kangxi wrote short encomia for well over a thousand of them, expressing his appreciation for their enlightened views. The Jesuits appear to have recognized these essays as representing the best political thought in the Chinese tradition, so they rendered many of them into French, after which they were retranslated into English and other languages in the early 18th century.

Many essays in *The Mirror* began with the same premises as *Social Compact*: the people's happiness as the source of legitimate governance; the necessity for "genius and virtue" in public officers; and equality as the bedrock of law. But in Europe those sentiments were not at all mainstream at the time of their translation into French and English.

Loubna El Amine has reviewed, and critiqued, a body of scholarship holding that modern theories of government evolved out of European feudalism (91-92). It is difficult to reconcile that view with the response to feudalism we find in thinkers like Rousseau, Paine, and Jefferson. They did not present their political ideas as an extension of feudal "rights" to the wider body of the people. It required a complete rejection of the ontological basis for privilege informing the feudal conception of "rights." As Tom Paine put it in *Rights of Man*, "the idea of hereditary legislators is as inconsistent as that of hereditary judges ... and as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, or an hereditary wise man" (392-393).

Paine was contrasting a concept of authority based on substance with one based on performance. As Shuchen Xiang has shown (115), for thousands of years in Europe, aristocratic authority had been rooted in an ontological argument in which some groups differed in "substance" from others. For Rousseau, Paine and Jefferson, the assignment of authority instead would depend upon competence and a commitment to the people's welfare. Jefferson held that anyone might possess the requisite will and ability to serve the people "without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance" (365).

As it happens, those views are identical with those common in Chinese political theory. Because the purpose of government was the people's safety and happiness, Chinese theory devoted much attention to the selection of capable officers and rooting out corruption. Rousseau, Paine, and Jefferson shared those concerns, and sought to achieve those ends by means of European institutions such as parliamentary bodies and elections. But those institutions were not designed for those purposes. They were designed, in fact, to permit a small, hereditary elite to maintain its grip on political power.

Chinese Political Discourse in Europe before Rousseau

Because most textbooks have ignored China's role in Enlightenment battles over authority, it may help to survey the history of China's intrusion into European political discourse over the century before Rousseau began his literary career. An extensive argument along those lines can be found in my recent book on China and the English Enlightenment, and here I will be drawing on evidence examined there. The distinction between a substance model versus a tally model of authority was

explored in my essay on “What is Authority Made of?” (73-98). I will spare the reader a review those arguments, limiting myself to a brief survey of some of the key moments when Chinese texts intervened in European debates over political authority.

Rousseau wrote *Social Compact* more than a century after Matteo Ricci introduced to Europeans a radically new understanding of political authority and government. Back then Europe was far from democratic. As Jonathan Israel aptly summarized it, the “ancien regime world . . . was one ruled by princes and nobilities, and characterized by huge inequalities of wealth and legally buttressed privilege” (*A Revolution* 66). In that social construction “the people” referred to the uncouth multitude who were “to be ruled.” As late as 1776 the Parlement of Paris, referencing Aristotle’s *Politics*, proclaimed “It is a necessity that some command and others obey. Sovereign lords issue orders to everyone in their state; they address their orders to the great, the great to the middling, the middling to the small, and the small to the people” (qtd. in Powers, *China and England* 95).

It was in the context of that tradition of thought that Ricci explained to his readers that China did not have an aristocracy. Government functionaries were expected to be competent and to work, not for His Majesty, but for the public interest. They took qualifying examinations anonymously, which reduced the influence of race, religion, or family connections on the selection process. Once appointed, performance was reviewed periodically and corruption, when detected, was to be punished. Ricci notes that corruption existed, but also described China’s elaborate system of checks, a novelty for his European readership (386-390). Ricci’s letters went through sixteen editions in multiple languages in the space of a few decades. Europeans were amazed that Chinese law encouraged taxpayers and officials alike to expose corruption or bad policy. In an aristocracy, where would a commoner get the right (privilege) to question a gentleman? China’s formal system of checks, which worked bottom-up as well as top-down, was introduced in 1732. In 1740 James Roberts lampooned the British system for lacking checks; some time thereafter, British apologists began claiming that Parliament was a check, but Tom Paine (1776) dismissed that claim as “farcical.” Obviously, because the king was an aristocrat, the lords were aristocrats; and the MPs were mostly members of the nobility with a few commoners as surrogates for aristocrats. That would be like appointing a coal executive to the EPA. Although the Whiggish myth is what comes down to us in textbooks, it would appear to have been invented some decades after the British had been called out for lacking a formal system of checks.

17th-century accounts of China introduced to Europeans a novel conception of political legitimacy. Since Aristotle’s *Politics*, mainstream theory had conceived of political authority as a substance inherited in the blood: metaphorically speaking, aristocrats were made of gold, commoners of brass, and so on. Because metals can be ranked in quality, this tropic construction naturally gave rise to a caste system.

By 1686 key Confucian concepts had been rendered into Latin, then into English as *The Morals of Confucius* (1691). From these Europeans would learn that those who govern should take the people’s happiness as the standard for legitimate authority, a theme that emerges as a leitmotif in passages such as these:²

1. [Emperor Yao] ruled with so much prudence, wisdom, and in many demonstrations of Clemency and kindness to his subjects, that they were the happiest People of the Earth.
2. To be loved and faithfully served, [princes] ought to convince their subjects, by their conduct,

that they design only to make them happy.

If the people themselves decide whether they are happy, then by necessity, authority is contingent upon fulfilling a public charge, with “the people” constituting the public. In Chinese theory this charge appears as “*ming*” (“命”). Today this term is translated as “mandate.” The monarch has no intrinsic authority possessed as a substance; all he has is a charge that is contingent upon his fulfillment of certain duties to the people. The dynamic inherent in this arrangement gave rise to the idea of authority as performance rather than as substance.

But then who are “the people”? In European political thought, the term “people” is notoriously mercurial. Often it excluded the greater part of the multitude, just as Donald Munro observed that Aristotle excluded from political participation farmers, merchants, artisans, women, foreigners, and so on (18). The Chinese term translated as “the people” in early modern Europe was *min* (“民”). *Min* differed from “the people” in 17th-century English in that this term referred specifically to taxpayers, most of whom were farmers, so there was no way to exclude laboring people from membership in “the people.”

In China, there were formal channels through which the people could complain directly to the government, anonymously if so desired, a fact that inspired English reformers. By 1731 Free Thinkers such as Eustace Budgell (1686-1737) were citing Chinese policy documents in support of “liberty of the press.” Forty years before the American Revolution Samuel Johnson deduced from translated Chinese documents that the government’s authority was contingent upon the people’s happiness (Powers, *China and England* ch. 8).

A common motif in translated Chinese documents was the need to appoint qualified men to office, men who were both capable and dedicated to the public good. The Chinese terms for that generally were translated as “genius and virtue,” “merit and virtue,” “capacity and virtue,” or some other variant. The first term referred to learning and ability, while the second meant dedication to the public welfare. In time, those terms entered general use in France and England as loan words from the Chinese translations (Powers, “What Is” 90-94).

The impact of Chinese loan phrases can be seen in the preface for the Brookes edition (1736) of the book Johnson later reviewed:

From the history of their emperors you will find, what you have long since learnt, that the most despotic power is no security to the supreme magistrate when he degenerates into a tyrant, or discovers no regard for the public welfare; that goodness and clemency are the firmest support of the throne, and that the chiefest glory of a prince is to reign in the hearts of his subjects. (2: Foreword addressed to Frederick, the Prince of Wales, n. p.)

This passage situates authority in performance. If one applies that notion to official appointments, the substance of noble blood is rendered immaterial. What good is noble blood if you lack the learning and talents necessary to benefit the people?

About the same time writers such as Etienne de Silhouette and Voltaire were publishing similar arguments in France. In 1749, Abbé Raynal reconfigured the notion of a republic along Mencian lines. Previously a “republic” referred to an aristocracy with a parliamentary body representing their

interests. In his history of the Dutch Republic, Raynal interpreted the political fortunes of a republic as a function of winning the hearts and minds of the people (Powers, “What Is” 93-94).

After that, no criticism or defense of aristocracy could escape the web of debate rooted in different conceptions of Chinese practice. Rousseau was no exception. The essay on the *Social Compact* refers repeatedly to themes that had entered European discourse through translations from the Chinese, beginning with the goals of government.

The Goals of Government

One feature that the Compact’s author shares with mainstream Chinese political theory is an open contempt for feudalism, and so Rousseau adopted Raynal’s model of a republic, retaining some features of European practice, but also adopting the people’s happiness as the *raison d’être* of the republic.

Rousseau acknowledged further that promoting the people’s happiness required appointing men of genius and virtue. While claiming that all (male) citizens might be qualified to serve in office, he acknowledged that some were more qualified than others:

In a popular government all citizens are born magistrates; but in this the number of the latter are very limited, and they become such only by election; a method by which their probity, their talents, their experience, and all those other reasons for preference to public esteem, are an additional security that the people shall be wisely governed. (*Social Compact* 115)

In Rousseau’s model, the purpose of elections was to choose those most qualified for the job. The qualifications sought turn out to be much the same as those found in translations from Chinese texts. In the passage just cited, “probity” corresponds to “virtue”, or “*de*” (“德”), and “talents” corresponds to “*xian*” (“贤”) or “*cai*” (“才”). In his *A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality among Mankind*, Rousseau referred multiple times to the people’s happiness as contingent on merit-based appointment, understood as some variation of merit and virtue (xxiv-v, xxxix, xlii, xlii, 152, 161, 162-163, 173). In late imperial China, pairs of terms like these described the standard qualifications required of officials, a linguistic habit duly conveyed in translations from the *Mirror of Classical Literature* (Du Halde, *The General* 210). In *Social Compact*, Rousseau reminds us again that:

the public voice hardly ever raises unworthy persons to high posts in the administration; making choice only of men of knowledge and abilities, who discharge their respective functions with honour: whereas those who generally make their way to such posts under monarchical government, are men of little minds and mean talents. (121)

Elsewhere Rousseau went on to describe a merit-based conception of government:

In a word, that order would be undoubtedly the best and most natural, according to which the wise and experienced few direct the multitude, were it certain that the few would in their government consult the interest of the majority governed, and not their own. (116)

In this passage Rousseau recognized the problem of corruption as the use of office for personal profit. Controlling corruption necessarily requires the exercise of authority, so Rousseau's solution for corruption would depend upon the nature of authority itself. In *Social Compact*, authority ultimately derives from the people, but in Rousseau's hybrid system elections, rather than examinations, were the primary means of selecting men with the qualifications needed to promote the people's happiness.

In China by contrast, centuries of experience had taught bureaucratic theorists that selecting qualified officials was difficult business. Challenges included the problem of establishing the candidate's competence and honesty; guarding against bias in the examiners due to the candidate's ethnicity, religion, wealth, or connections; and the possibility of cheating or bribery. Even after a candidate had been assigned to office, the system had to guard against corruption. Rousseau recognized several of these challenges, but given his commitment to elections, he had to develop different solutions.

Authority

Rousseau accepted Raynal and Mencius's idea that the authority to govern comes from the people. Like Rousseau, we still refer to that quality as "sovereignty," but the literary trope underlying that term is a metaphor of substance, a substance originally transmitted in royal blood. Substances can be inherited but, as Mencius states clearly in the Wanzhang chapter, the hearts of the people cannot. Each person's opinion belongs to that person, not to the government.

The Chinese term for the authority to govern, *de*, also was rooted in the people's will, but had no connection whatever to biological transmission. In modern times it has been translated into English as "virtue," "power," or "charisma." Those who possessed it, together with talent and ability, were regarded as qualified to participate in government. We find this standard already in one of China's earliest surviving texts, possibly dating to more than four thousand years BP.³

任官惟贤才，左右惟其人，臣为上为德，为下为民。其难其审。

[The minister Yi Yin speaks to the young king:] Appoint as officers only those with wisdom and talent, and choose as advisors only those suitable for the task. In relation to his sovereign, the minister's goal should always be to promote his *de*; in relation to the people his aim should always be to promote what is beneficial to them. (Legge, *The Chinese Classics* III: 216-217)

Talent, wisdom, and *de* appear here as essential characteristics of a good officer, while parallel construction reveals that *de* corresponds to what is beneficial for the people. But without elections, how would these capable and well-intentioned men know what is good for the people?

Mencius reasonably presumed that all people want to be safe from the threat of violence, to be free from want, and to be free to raise their families without undue interference from bullies or unjust laws, such that the people "may live out their lives in happiness and with full bellies" ("乐岁终身饱") (1.7, 15-16). To accomplish that, the state should provide schools and other public goods like sound management of the economy. General prosperity and peace were signs that a monarch or official possessed *de*, while widespread suffering was evidence that he lacked it. To meet that standard, it

would not be necessary to hold elections. What was required was expertise and a dedication to the public welfare.

By Han times, it was already felt that this standard was insufficient. In addition to peace and plenty, it was thought that the people should be able to expose ineffective policies or official malfeasance, but elections were not the chosen solution. More direct and individualized channels of complaint were established in the Grievance Offices (登闻检院). These officers were charged with accepting and recording complaints from “the people,” a rubric that included the rural population.

By Song times the duties and powers of these offices had been clarified and expanded. Just the same as a civil or military official, any taxpayer could blow the whistle on official conflicts of interest, abuses of power, or unjust laws. The officers could accept these complaints in verbal form, anonymously or otherwise, but were required to render them into official documents for further review (Powers, *China and England* ch. 4).

In addition, any literate person—man or woman—could publish critical views of government in prose or verse. Such publications were intended to influence “public opinion” or “*gongyi*” (“公议”). In part due to push back from power-hungry officials, this concept came under extensive theorization in Song times and was regarded as possibly the most important safeguard for just government (127-128, 153-154).

In sum, by the 11th century, Chinese statesmen had developed two kinds of criteria for assessing the people’s happiness. The first consisted of the basic requirements for the enjoyment of any rights, namely personal safety; a full belly; and a roof over one’s head. Without those, it would be fatuous to preach about “public opinion” or other civil rights. This standard did not require feedback from the people.

The second set of criteria consisted of channels for direct feedback regarding official malfeasance or suggestions for improving current policy. E. A. Kracke has shown that the Grievance system was far from perfect, but that it could work as designed, and it was accessed by a broad spectrum of the public (497-498).

One can find compatible views in the Declaration of Independence, which mentions explicitly the people’s Safety and Happiness as duties of government. For Thomas Jefferson, it was those duties, among others, that compelled the government to appoint men of “genius and virtue, [who] should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens” (365).

In short, one finds little disagreement between Rousseau and Chinese theory regarding the ends of government. This can be understood as due to the Mencian principles shared by both, but there is considerable divergence regarding how to recruit officers of “genius and virtue,” or how to deal with corruption. The root of this great divergence was differing conceptions of “authority.”

Sovereignty and the People

In China, the term *de* described both the sovereignty of the state and the political authority of office. In neither case was authority rooted in an ontological metaphor. Instead, for some two-thousand years the governing metaphor for authority in China has been the tally. The phrase “the facts do not correspond to the charge” (“名不副实”) and its cognates means that the officer’s actions do not tally

with his charge. Political legitimacy required verification by comparison with the facts, as opposed to relying only on a survey of people's opinions.

In bureaucratic terms, a mismatch between claim and reality was understood as the abuse of public office for private profit. That theory was articulated more than two thousand years ago in classical bureaucratic theory, but it was only in Song times that the public/private distinction was theoretically derived from humanity's entanglement with the natural order.

Zhang Ruyu's early 13th century encyclopedia of government explained the origin of the public/private distinction by placing society within the context of the natural world. The author presumed that Nature's basic disposition favors the production of life. Therefore, it is the duty of government to work with nature to foster agriculture and other conditions necessary for the people's livelihood:

皆为民也 [……] 周家设官以为民机，皆顺天地之天工者也。(29.1086)

All of the earliest rulers established officials for the benefit of the people [...] The House of Zhou [ca. 1,000 BCE] established officials to serve the people. In the end all (these institutions) followed along with natural circumstances and furthered the work of nature.

The aim of human society is to promote human life, all human life. This means that the authority to make and execute laws is contingent upon the salient effects those laws have on the people. In Zhang Ruyu's text, this natural condition gives rise to the distinction between public and private interest without any reference to divine authority:

惟职当于事，则知所以为民。职浮于事，则徒知所以自为而已。

It is only when the duties of office are matched to this practice [the promotion of life] that one can know how to serve the people. If duties are disengaged from this practice, then all one knows is how to serve oneself. (Powers, "What Is" 76).

One mechanism for identifying malfeasance was the system of inspectors known as the *Yushitai* (御史台), or the Department of Investigation. In China they were seen as guardians of "public opinion," in contrast to the machinations of highly placed statesmen or a corrupt emperor. Although misleadingly translated as "censors," Lewis Maverick has shown that these officers and their duties were much discussed by reform-minded Europeans (248).

Another mechanism was the Grievance Office mentioned above. Officers who were found in dereliction of duty were to be dismissed and punished, but this could transpire efficiently only if the authority resided in the office, not in the officer. Since the authority of office was contingent on results, officers in the Department of Investigation would have the power to remove a fellow officer if the facts justified that action. Rousseau, on the other hand, runs into problems when it comes to disciplining errant officers. The reason is that his conception of authority is rooted in substance.

Rousseau on Authority

In *Social Compact*, sovereignty resides exclusively with the people, and is expressed in the laws. Rousseau concludes from this that the officers who execute the laws are simply commissioners

charged with carrying them out on behalf of the people:

Those, therefore, who affirm that the act, by which a people profess submission to their chiefs or governors, is not a contract, are certainly right; it being in fact nothing more than the conferring of a simple commission on the said chiefs. . . . (92)

As in Chinese bureaucratic theory, the officer as a person possessed no authority of his own. In China, this was because the authority was in the office. For Rousseau, it was because sovereignty resides in the people. Rousseau authority John T. Scott explains:

In his more detailed discussion of the role of government in the essay on “Political Economy,” where he also stresses the need to distinguish the sovereign and the government, Rousseau characterizes the government as attending to the execution of the laws and to “administrative and economic details” *under the guidance of the general will expressed through law*. Nowhere in his treatments of government does he suggest that it shares the legislative power with the people. (138-139, emphasis added)

Apparently, this is where men of “genius and virtue” come into the picture. Presumably honest men could be trusted not to betray the public trust, and they would have the intelligence and learning required to turn the people’s will into executable policy. To the extent that Rousseau adopted this principle, he had accepted a tally model, but under that model, each office should possess the authority required to carry out its charge. In the earlier English edition of *Social Compact*, Rousseau ignored that strategy because he saw authority as unitary:

The sovereignty, however . . . consists essentially of the general will, and the will cannot be represented: it is either identically the same, or some other; there can be no mean term in the case. The deputies of the people, therefore, neither are nor can be their representatives; they are only mere commissioners, and can conclude definitively on nothing. (163)

Like Hobbes, Rousseau presumed that the will informing the laws must be unitary. In that conception, it was impossible to situate authority within separate offices. Those assumptions very much complicated the challenge of containing official malfeasance. Where corruption in China was mainly an administrative matter, in Rousseau’s theory it became a political matter.

Rousseau was by no means the first in Europe to raise the issue of corruption. Ricci had articulated the Chinese conception of corruption as a systemic administrative problem rather than merely a moral concern. In addition, corruption had been at the core of China-inspired debates in England since the 1720s. Prior to that, what we now call corruption was merely a privilege of rank. While commoners might suffer for pilfering public money, Edward Pearce notes that nobility like Robert Walpole were “entitled to invest all [state] surpluses and, at the end of the accounting year, keep the interest” (57, 69, 204). During the 1720s the Free Thinkers, having read Chinese policy documents, began to call out Walpole’s practices as “corruption,” where that term now signified the use of public office for private benefit (Powers, *China and England* ch. 8).

The term “checks” in a modern sense was formally introduced in 1732 in B. Le Stourgeon’s *Universal History*. That work described China’s systemic, reciprocal controls as “checks,” noting that they operated bottom-up as well as top-down. By 1736, Du Halde’s *Description* provided extensive discussions of Chinese procedures and institutions for curbing abuses of power. The *Description* also offered an entire section devoted to anecdotes of officers who either defended or violated the distinction between public office and private interest (68-81).

Echoing these discourses, Rousseau maintained that legitimate authority would dissolve as soon as the chief executive, or any of the officers, abused his position for personal profit:

The dissolution of the state indeed may happen in two ways. First, when the prince does not govern according to the law; but arrogates the sovereign power to himself. . . . So that when the government usurps the sovereignty, at that instant the social compact is broken, and the individuals, who were citizens before, are restored to the rights of natural liberty, and are compelled, not legally obliged, to obedience. (*Social Compact* 148-149)

Here we can see that Rousseau’s “compact” is not far removed from the Chinese *ming*, or “charge.” In the Du Halde examples, failure to execute one’s charge dissolves the officer’s authority. That is why Mencius insists that, as soon as a king behaves as a tyrant, he is no longer a king.

In Rousseau’s interpretation, authority dissolves because the government violates its compact with the people. These two readings are similar, but they differ in that Rousseau supposes authority to be unitary. As a result, it is not merely that an officer should be dismissed; the entire system collapses. If this were the only way to control corruption, a democratic government would not last very long.

Elsewhere in *Social Compact* Rousseau offers a more practical remedy. This method echoed Chinese practice in that it relied upon “tribunals,” and “censors.” Rousseau claimed that he took this idea from the Romans. In Rome there were censors who enforced public morality, but the Jesuits had used “censor” as the standard translation for officers in the Department of Investigation, while “tribunal” was their chosen term for Chinese departments.

As noted earlier, the Chinese “censors” were regarded as champions of public opinion. The 1736 Watts edition of Du Halde begins with a short summary of government institutions. Regarding the “Censorate” the text notes that “the whole people regard them as the fathers of their country, and martyrs for the public welfare” (5). Rousseau likewise regarded the censors as “defenders of the laws” and a conduit for public opinion:

The public opinion is a kind of law which the censor puts into execution (yet) . . . so far, therefore, is the censorial tribunal from being the arbiter of popular opinions, it only declares them; and, whenever it departs from them, its decisions are vain and ineffectual. (*Social Compact* 214, 224)

The Chinese term for “public opinion” (*gongyi*, or *gonglun*) often was left untranslated in the 1730s, or else was rendered merely as “reason.” Yet here, Rousseau expects us to believe that a concept unavailable to Europeans in the 1730s was somehow well understood by the Romans, whose literature Europeans had studied religiously over previous centuries.⁴

The inspector system might have worked but in Rousseau’s theory, the censors had no authority of

their own. Unable to draw upon the authority of facts, they required authorization from the opinions of the people. Rousseau recognized, however, that the will of the people was not always prudent:

It follows, from what has been said, that the general will is always in the right, and constantly tend(s) to the public good; it does not follow, however, that the deliberations of the people will always be attended with the same rectitude. We are ever desirous of our own good, but we do not always distinguish in what it consists. (*Social Compact* 42)

In short, he understood that the popular vote (deliberations of the people) did not always tally with “the general will.” In *Revolution of the Mind*, Jonathan Israel referred to this kind of conceptual slippage as the “‘Achilles’ heel” of the radical program, namely, the tension between merit-based appointment and popular sovereignty:

Those who should “naturally” have the right to represent the nation, argued Diderot and d’Holbach, were those “citizens” best informed about its affairs, needs, and rights, “persons of superior education and wisdom,” as the English radical William Godwin later styled them, who were therefore “the most committed to the public well-being.” (66)

When the question arose whether the people could be trusted to choose the best men for the job, Baron d’Holbach responded that “the people rarely makes mistakes about the character of citizens which it scrutinizes” (66). In *Social Compact*, Rousseau seems to have acknowledged this Achilles heel, for he admits that the vote does not always represent the general will: “[T]he general will consists less in the number of votes, than in the common interest that unites them” (115).

This would imply that, sometimes, the general will is the same as the common interest, a view very close to that of Mencius. Yet in Rousseau’s system, when the two conflict, the censors cannot correct it because they can only enforce the vote of the people as it exists at any moment. And since the people’s will is absolute, it might, in principle, restrict the liberties of fellow citizens. Israel pinpointed these inconsistencies in a single sentence:

Rousseau’s political thought, then, and perhaps especially his Social Contract, represents a strange mixture of Radical Enlightenment elements with strands of deism, cultism, eulogy of the ordinary, and intolerant censorship, and a strongly authoritarian and particularist aspect pertaining to his particular conception of *volanté générale*. (*Democratic Enlightenment* 106)

The Popular Will in Chinese Theory

In Song China, the matter of the common interest arose as part of an argument in Wang Qi’s policy document proposing the adoption of a progressive tax in the 11th century:

判三司户部勾院王琪言 [...] 且自第一至第二等兼并之家，占田常广，于义仓则所入常多；自第三至第四等中下之家，占田常狭，于义仓则所入常少。及其遇水旱，行赈给，则兼并

之家未必待此而济，中下之室实先受其赐矣。损有余，补不足，实天下之利也。(Powers, *China and England* 57)

Minister of the Department of Finance, Wang Qi says: [...] the first and second grade of wealthy families own large tracts of land, so they contribute more grain to the Just Granaries; the third and the fourth grades of middle and low-income families have less land and so contribute less grain. In years of flood or drought, the wealthy families (first and second grade taxpayers) may be able to depend on themselves, so the government would first provide support to the middle and low-income families. This is called compensating for deficiencies by making use of surpluses, *to the benefit of all the people* (emphasis added).

Wang assumed that a progressive tax policy would be justified by the fact that all taxpayers would benefit from it, not because all taxpayers would vote for it. He further assumed that those conditions would be best secured by officials with the knowledge and judgement to determine whether most people would benefit from it. In other words, the government could set the agenda for policy, but most typically regarding those basic rights that all rational people may be supposed to desire.

What about matters other than basic needs? As we have seen, at the time that Wang wrote, all taxpayers had the right to submit suggestions and complaints to the Grievance Office, and officers were instructed to “ignore the complainant’s social condition” (“不问尊卑”). This means that even an ordinary farmer could lodge complaints with government officers. As Sima Guang (1019-1086) put it,

虽其言辞鄙杂，皆身受实患，直贡其诚，不可忽也。(220)

Though their language may be coarse, it will reflect their actual, physical hardships, and if they express their genuine condition in direct language, we cannot but take it seriously.

In other words, taxpayers would enjoy a certain expertise in the subject of their grievance, and that expertise would provide the authority for their complaint. That sounds not unreasonable, yet all societies experience moments of crisis, and Rousseau offered an analysis of political collapse that could apply to imperial China as well:

when the bonds of society begin to relax, and the state grow weak; when the private interests of individuals begin to appear, and that of parties to influence the state, the objects of public good meet with opposition; unanimity no longer presides in the assemblies of the people; the general will is no longer the will of all; contradictions and debates arise, and the most salutary counsel is not adopted without dispute. (*Social Compact* 181)

How did Chinese theory respond to that situation, and did “the people” have any role to play in the response? In Song times, the classic instance of this kind of crisis occurred during the Chancellorship of Wang Anshi (1021-1086). Since the beginning of the 11th century, both officials and taxpayers had been free to express their views with a liberty unmatched in Europe for almost a thousand years. That all changed (temporarily) when Wang Anshi took advantage of a young emperor’s inexperience to suppress those who exposed the disastrous effects his policies had upon the people. This act of repression inspired multiple condemnations throughout Chinese history. Among these, Zhen Dexiu’s

(1178-1235) was translated into French, with the English version appearing in Du Halde's 1738 edition:

臣闻天下有不可泯没之理根本于人心，万世犹一日者，公议是也。自有天地以来，虽甚无道之世，破裂天常，隳坏人纪，敢为而弗顾者，能使公议不行于天下，不能使公议不存于人心善乎先正。刘安世之论曰公议即天道也。天道未尝一日亡，顾所在何如尔。

It is a common and true saying, that there is in the universe a particle of unextinguished Reason rooted in the heart of man, which being at all times the same, is the cause of certainty. Ever since the world has existed, there has been in it a good deal of disorder. It has increased to such a height in some reigns, that the laws have been without force, and the wicked have without dread or shame ventured everything. Thus, corruption has been the cause why, in reality, private passions at last became the springs of government. But this corruption never extinguishes, at least in a great many, the light of reason which condemns this disorder. (*A Description* I: 586-587)

For Zhen, the crux of the matter was “reason,” the Neo-Confucian “*li*” (“理”). While *li* was inherent in natural process, the term also referred to whatever was rational. As Peter Onge has shown, the Chancellor had claimed that his policies would benefit the people, but farmers and small entrepreneurs reportedly were going bankrupt, with famished indigents filling the streets (226-231). From the perspective of bureaucratic theory, the crisis originated from the fact that Wang was using the powers of office to create an alternate reality, one that didn't tally with the real-life experiences of taxpayers.

At the time, Wang had corrupted the Department of Investigation, filling its offices with cronies, so the normal checks didn't apply. What then, to do? Zhen entrusted the ability to discern fact from fiction to the “the light of reason” which, in Chinese, was *gongyi*, or “public opinion.” As mentioned earlier, the Jesuits lacked a proper translation for *gongyi*, but in Zhen's essay they sometimes conveyed the idea as the “voice of the people,” the same term that Rousseau would later use in speaking of the “Roman” censors:

Reason commonly speaks by the voice of the people and it is of the greatest Importance to regard it.

In effect, the voice of the people is commonly the voice of reason, and reason is the voice of Tyen (Heaven).

Found your government not upon the suggestions of one man, who frequently is directed by a cabal, or animated by interest, but upon the sentiments of the public, or the advice of the majority. (586-587)

Not only does Rousseau's *Social Compact* agree with Chinese theory regarding the aims of government; it also agrees that ultimately the people can be trusted to perceive what is best for them. How did Zhen reconcile Mencius' general notion of the common interest—which required no feedback—with his more specific idea? He wrote:

故善为国者畏公议如畏天，则人悦之，天助之。(745)

The respect which they (good princes and ministers) have for Tyen, makes them regard the public

voice, and the general sentiments; thereby they gain the hearts of the people, and draw down the assistance of Tyen.⁵

The argument here is somewhat tautological because Mencius' view of Heaven was founded on this passage from the *Book of History*:

《泰誓》曰：“天视自我民视，天听自我民听。”此之谓也。

“Heaven sees through what my people see; Heaven hears through what my people hear.” (Legge, *The Four Books* 795; my trans.)

Heaven's assent and support is identical to the people's assent and support, so naturally, winning the people's hearts and minds would be tantamount to gaining “Heaven's” support.

Considering the several points upon which Rousseau and Chinese theory agree, we must ask, had Rousseau read Zhen Dexiu's essay? He certainly could have as it was readily available in Du Halde's *Description*, but I will leave that aside for now. Instead, let's review how the key terms of governance established in mainstream Chinese theory took on new functions after entering Enlightenment discourse in mid-century England.

Rousseau and Mencius in Dialogue

It appears that Rousseau shared much common ground with political thinkers in China. First among these was the problem of authority itself. This required no contact with China; any political philosopher would hit upon it sooner or later.

He also shared with Chinese theory an open contempt for feudal systems of government. Living at a time when aristocracy was the most common form of rule in Europe, his contempt is easy to understand. As for Chinese thinkers, Liu Zongyuan's 9th-century essay on feudalism explained in detail what was wrong with that system. Following the collapse of the Tang dynasty, China in fact avoided the institution of hereditary social status for most of its history.

Beyond these, considerable common ground evolved from Rousseau's adaptations of Chinese political concepts available in translation. Among the most important of these are the following: 1) The “people” is not limited to the nobility or the wealthy; rather it includes the greater mass of working people. 2) The support or will of the people is the source of political legitimacy. 3) The people are the ultimate arbiters of what is good for them. 4) The aim of government is to protect the people from violence, to maintain their health, and to promote their happiness. 5) The best way to pursue those ends is to appoint persons of “genius and virtue” to key offices. 6) As it is difficult to guarantee honesty in public officials, institutionalized checks are a necessity.

It is worth noting that all six of these principles differ radically from the premises informing Aristotle's *Politics*. Likewise, they bear no resemblance to those concepts informing *ancien regime* aristocracies.

If we begin with the idea of a *Compact*, or “Contract,” we can see that this is simply another way of expressing a tally model of authority. A legal standard is created and the parties to the contract must conform their actions to those standards. In the 1776 English translation of Abbé Raynal's

Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies, the term *ming* was in fact translated as “contract” (I: 95). In *Social Compact*, the tally model is maintained throughout in the sense that any deviation in government from the will of the people violates the contract, just as a Chinese official’s authority, “*zhi*” (“职”), would evaporate as soon as he acted outside the parameters of his charge.

Having established common ground, we can appreciate more fully the differences that emerged between Rousseau and Chinese conceptions of authority. This great divergence corresponds well to the contrast Jonathan Israel drew between Spinoza and Rousseau.

In *Enlightenment Contested*, Israel noted that the doctrines of Spinoza and Confucius had been closely associated from the late 17th century onwards (645). In *Democratic Enlightenment* he observed that both Spinoza and Rousseau maintained that the power of the state “must be consecrated in society and the minds of individuals by a shared moral creed or civic religion,” but their conception of that creed differed sharply. Spinoza’s creed “is strictly universalist, tolerant, and anchored in reason,” while “Rousseau’s civic religion is anchored in the popular will and at key points is antagonistic to reason as well as to the equality and justice which he too aspires to ground in his ‘general will’” (637).

Within the terms of this argument, these apparent contradictions can be understood in part as the result of Rousseau’s attachment to a substance model of authority. Spinoza, like other radical Enlightenment figures, as well as Confucius, regarded reason as a necessary standard and guide without which it would not be possible to benefit the people. Rousseau also sought to promote the people’s welfare, but his substance metaphor required a more literal understanding of popular sovereignty.

What about the will of the people in China? In practice this was of two kinds, corresponding roughly to “*minxin*” (“民心”) and *gongyi*. A chief executive or an officer would win the support of the people if he rendered to them public goods such as safety and the general conditions for prosperity. That standard would not change appreciably over time, so winning the people’s support chiefly required expertise and dedication to the common good.

Gongyi became politically significant in matters such as free speech and the expectation that government would adhere to the rule of law. The tally concept informing de applies either way because the government’s performance can be checked against the people’s condition (in the first instance) or against the people’s disposition (in the second).

Social Compact seems to have affinities with Hobbes, and so Rousseau’s “sovereignty” remained unitary and absolute. On that model the general will was not fallible, and so need not be checked against the facts of the people’s condition. All that mattered was their opinion which had to be checked frequently in assemblies or elections.

Although Rousseau understood that officers have no authority of their own, and he accepted the need for checks, the substance model complicated the problem of corruption. In Imperial China corruption was mainly an administrative matter. The determination of guilt was not left up to one official—there was a process—but only the facts were needed. In *Social Compact* the censors could act only if the people made their will apparent, but of course they might not command of either the legal training or the facts of the case.

This leaves us with Rousseau’s Achilles heel. As Rousseau himself acknowledged, the people’s determination is not always in their own interest, yet by retaining the substance model, he rendered the

popular will absolute, even when it was based on faulty reasoning or false information.

In the end what we find is in no sense a clash of incommensurable cultures. Viewed in tandem with Chinese political theory, Rousseau no longer emerges as the essence of Western liberalism. He may be liberal, but is hardly Western, considering that so many of his core concepts (contract, the people, censors, checks, “the people’s voice,” “genius and virtue,” etc.) resonate with one or other Chinese phrase.

Where he differs from the Chinese material likewise does not reflect his Western essence though it may have roots in earlier European thought. Viewed this way, what we find is that Rousseau made use of multiple written sources for political theory, some from England, some from Europe, and others from China, but there is no need to imagine that any of these was closer to Rousseau than others. He made use of them all. The only difference is, he chose not to credit his Chinese mentors, a legacy that continues to the present day.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this study, I make no claims regarding Rousseau’s political thought as interpreted in France during his own time. My interest is in Rousseau as understood in England and America during the late 18th century. While many English intellectuals could read Rousseau in the original, the popularity of his work in translation is evident. Those translations tell us how Rousseau was interpreted within English political discourse at a time when Englishmen had ample access to translations of essays by Mencius and famous Chinese statesmen. The latter also circulated widely among English and American men of letters at that time. I will be using the 1764 English translation, published two years after the first French edition. The term “compact” was used in England until the 1790s, when “contract” makes its appearance.
2. *Morals of Confucius* provided paraphrases of arguments from Confucian texts such as the *Analects*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Mencius*. As is often the case in 18th-century translations, the sentiments are accurate, but the translations are loose, so characters are not provided.
3. Translations from the *Book of History* are mine after consulting Legge’s translation. The Legge translations are referenced because readers can consult the larger context there in the original, as well as an alternative translation.
4. Some of Rousseau’s contemporaries already regarded his claims about Roman government as “absurd” (Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment* 105).
5. This is the Cave edition translation, not mine. All this is from the same essay by Zhen Dexiu in Du Halde’s 1738 *A Description*, p. 587.

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