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Histories of Thought and Comparative Political Theory:
The Curious Thesis of "Chinese Origins for Western Knowledge," 1860-1895

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Around 1860, a loosely associated group of Chinese reformers began agitating for changes to the Confucian civil service curriculum. Wanting to educate younger elites in mathematics, engineering, and natural science, knowledge only recently introduced into China by Protestant missionaries, these reformers claimed that such novel "Western" practices actually developed from ancient Chinese precedents. The claim was intended not to entrench allegiance to existing Chinese thought, but to enable China to contribute to an established stream of "Western" scientific and technical knowledge.[1] Most interpretations of this wildly-popular "China-origins thesis" attribute it to nativism or a rhetorical strategy. Yet as one of the first attempts by Chinese to grapple with their own cultural and historical specificity, the thesis sheds light on broader questions of how we might engage "foreign" knowledge.

I argue that these Chinese reformers pose Chinese origins for Western knowledge not because they assume that historically-situated difference is more easily or naturally overcome than culturally-situated difference. Rather, they intuit how situating difference *within* a received genealogy inscribes it as disciplinary (that is, capable of facilitating meaningful innovation), rather than an object of assimilation (in which it is represented within and in the terms of some existing discourse). The China-origins thesis can thus be read not as a historical claim about actual origins, but a political claim intended to endow foreign knowledge with recognized "membership" in some existing practice—in their case, the *ru xue* (scholarly learning) that constituted legitimate knowledge in late Imperial China. Its advocates ultimately interrogate rigid binaries between indigenous and foreign knowledge, however, by exploring how the inscription of difference as one kind of "otherness" (say, historical) rather than another (say, cultural or foreign) enables certain kinds of intellectual self-transformations to take place. By identifying Western science as a constitutive rather than supplementary part of *ru* learning, the China-origins thesis enshrined it as part of those

parameters of intelligibility and judgment that identify future developments as innovations of, rather than departures from, such learning. The ironic outcome, however, is that in integrating Western science into an existing frame of discourse, these reformers end up displacing the repositories of (largely Confucian) past thought that once lent definition to *ru* learning, and contribute instead to the evolving criteria of a very different kind of knowledge.

The China-origins thesis may seem outlandish, and its implications unexpected, but it throws into sharp relief the consequences of certain other alternatives for engaging marginalized bodies of thought. Many present efforts to do so have explored how a comparative theoretical framework can be built on the basis of shared questions or themes that prevail throughout global conversations on political life.[2] The methodological discussions underlying this comparative task tend to focus on how typically-marginalized thinkers can be meaningfully interpreted by differently-situated Anglophone political theorists, who come to represent these non-Western thinkers within the existing discourse of political thought as a means of disturbing its universalist assumptions, enhancing the self-reflexivity of its practitioners, or signaling the discipline's respect for global cultures.[3] But if we seek merely to represent the otherness of such thought in a way that acknowledges its difference, or to draw theoretical inspiration from it in a piecemeal way without attending to the historically-situated discourse that originally produced it, we effectively deny its capacity to discipline intellectual production in *its* terms, in our time. We may even in some ways fail to be true to the practice of political theory. Like the China-origins advocates, political theorists also tend to inscribe the otherness of (certain) past authors not as targets of representative inclusion, but as invitations to develop a practice we see ourselves sharing with them. The ironic paradox here is that we must accept something like the argument of the China-origins reformers if, with respect to the differently-situated knowledge that comparative political theorists and others are urging us to include in our disciplinary

conversations, we are to act like its *theorists*, rather than its ethnographers. This may not involve manufacturing Western origins for that knowledge, but it does require us to act in some ways as if such knowledge is part of our own past, if we are to avoid assimilating rather than becoming truly disciplined by it. This reading renders the "China-origins" thesis more plausible as a technique of engaging new knowledge. It also offers an example of how non-Western thought can throw light on the methodological as well as substantive dilemmas of political theory.

The Radical Implications of "China as Origin"

The deeply self-transformative possibilities intimated by the China-origins thesis emerged from ongoing struggles by Chinese educated elites to establish grounds for what they called "Western Learning" (*Xi xue*). Beginning in the 1840s, British gunships increased their military and economic presence in China, precipitating not only a shift in Chinese political strategy but also ongoing reflection by educated elites upon the conditions of cultural sustainability. Awed by the technological capabilities of European and American military forces, concerned scholar-officials, or literati, began urging the Qing court to include engineering, mathematics and other such technical knowledge in the basic training of civil servants, which at the time focused exclusively on literary and philosophical familiarity with a series of ancient classics and their more recent neo-Confucian commentaries. These literati justified the inclusion of Western knowledge in Chinese discourse either by reading Western ideas as better-developed complements of Chinese ones, or by identifying their origins in Chinese inventions subsequently developed by Europeans.

This thesis of "China as origin" (*Xi xue Zhong yuan*) "was shared by virtually all those who advocated technological borrowing [from the Western nations] in the period between 1860 and 1895," and motivated the reformist policies of the Yangwu ("foreign

affairs") movement.[4] Many early formulators of the thesis, such as Ruan Yuan and Zou Boqi, found what they believed to be prototypes of algebra, logic, astronomy and architecture in ancient non-canonical texts such as the *Mozi* and *Zengzi*.[5] Over a thirty year period, reformers advanced claims about the Chinese origins of everything from the alarm clock to parliamentary political systems.[6] Although not entirely without a basis in fact,[7] many of the Chinese origins postulated by the thesis turned out to be patently false.

Historians often the thesis as a device of rhetorical or political strategy,[8] or cultural self-comfort.[9] Yet this explanation begs the question of why the thesis could be effective or intelligible as a strategy for *reform*, rather than grounds for conservative retrenchment. Although the Yangwu movement sought to preserve Chinese values through the instrumental use of Western technology (a process they called "self-strengthening," *zi qiang*), the China-origins thesis ultimately destabilized Sino-centric claims to knowledge. The comments of one influential advocate of the thesis, Yixin (Prince Gong, brother of the Xianfeng emperor), reveal why this seemingly chauvinistic move uniquely enables radical self-transformation. In an 1866 memorial to the Tongzhi emperor,[10] Yixin defends the need to incorporate Western knowledge—specifically, mathematics and science—into the Chinese educational curriculum.

It is groundless to criticize [our reform policies] as 'abandoning Chinese ways and following Westerners.' For Western numbers actually all stem from ancient Chinese techniques of algebra (*tian yuan*), and even Western scholars view them as 'techniques that came from the east.' It is just that their [Western] dispositions are more meticulous, and are good at conceptualization, such that they can extend the given to make the new emerge and so gain fame across the seas. But actually, these methods are all originally Chinese methods. Astronomy and mathematics are this way, and the rest [of Western knowledge] is no different. China created the method,

and Westerners carried it on (*xi*). So if the Chinese are able to catch up with them, this will lie in our already intuiting the sources [of these methods], so that when we encounter problems we need not seek for outside solutions, and we can reap bountiful rewards.[11]

For Yixin, these putative similarities between China and the West do not broker mutual equality, but rather enable the former to "learn from" (*xue*) the latter, "perhaps to overtake them at some future time."[12] Contemporary reformist literati such as Feng Guifen were explicit that such learning implied more than imitation, but extended to improving upon tracks laid out by Western knowledge, to overtake the "barbarians" both militarily and intellectually.[13] By demonstrating indigenous origins for what seem to be foreign scientific practices, as Yixin does, Western science becomes, in effect, always-already part of the Chinese past; putative differences in scientific-historical trajectories are not posed to mark off the Western world and its intellectual concerns as distinct ways of life, but to motivate efforts to close the gaps by taking up foreign knowledge in a more thorough way—specifically, by grasping mathematics (i.e., the calculus) as a form of foundational reasoning (*li*) and not simply of instrumental technique (*ji qiao*).[14]

The deeply transformative stakes of learning this foreign knowledge are revealed in an ongoing debate between the Yangwu reformers and conservatives over whether degree holders—the literati who passed the civil service examinations to qualify them for office-holding—should learn Western mathematics and science. It is significant that the answer to this question pivoted not so much on the requirements of literati training per se, as on how and if certain foreign practices could qualify as legitimate forms of knowledge—that is, be categorized as knowledge for *ru* (degree-holding scholars) rather than techniques for *gongjiang* (artisans).[15] The strategy of conservatives, such as the Hanlin academician and

Grand Secretary Woren and his supporter, the Shandong administrator Zhang Shengzao, was to emphasize the superficiality of math and science, identifying them with practices unrelated to truly fundamental *ru* learning at the heart of virtuous Confucian statecraft. In an 1867 memorial, Zhang explains the irrelevance of Western knowledge to strengthening the Qing state:

> We make [degree-holders] read Confucius and Mencius and study [the ancient sage-kings] Yao and Shun, enabling them to illuminate the *ti* [literally, "structuring," fundamentals] and understand the *yong* ["use," technique, instrument]. The scope of this [learning] is already very broad, so what need is there to train them in [Western] techniques, or give them specialized understanding of the reasoning behind shipbuilding or weapons? … As for the strength of both our officials and people, [this requires] simply moral integrity.[16]

The conservatives' division of technical (*yong*) from fundamental (*ti*) knowledge denied the capacity of Western learning to effect any deep-seated transformations within Chinese political, social, or intellectual order by privileging Chinese knowledge as a sole source of *ti* and therefore also of value and strength. Woren claimed he had "never heard in all of history how using mere technical methods can restore strength and give rise to prosperity."[17] Yixin countered that Western knowledge itself contained both technical and fundamental components, the latter of which were examples of the well-established Chinese practice of natural studies (*gezhi*):

> It is said that construction [of Western ships and guns] is a matter of craftsmanship, and that scholars (*ru*) do not deign to do these things. We also have something to say

about this. All that is written in the "On Work" chapter of the Zhou Book of Rites [an essential Confucian reference for statecraft], concerns matters of building wheels and vehicles; but now, 1500 years later, all the schools have categorized [this chapter] as a matter for scholarly exegesis [i.e., and not of purely technical craftsmanship]. Why is this? So far as the practice of craftsmanship goes, scholars understand the reasoning behind it (*li*), so that once the reasoning is clear its technical usefulness (*yong*) expands. So how can it be doubted that today's learning, in studying the reasoning [behind Western craftsmanship], is a matter of scholarly 'investigation of things,' and not of forcing gentry literati themselves to go and do such work?[18]

Far from denying Woren's claim that technical knowledge should be distinguished from theoretical or fundamental knowledge, Yixin uses the distinction to position Western math and science as the very Chinese forms of reasoning (*li*) that underlie techniques. What are the specific and unique consequences of internalizing foreign thought in this way, when less convoluted alternatives were available? In Yixin's case, claiming Chinese origins for Western technology and science situates them within the domain of *ru* learning ("scholarly investigation of things") and thus categorizes them as legitimate knowledge. Like many advocates of the China-origins thesis, Yixin sees Western knowledge as an extension of existing *gezhi* or *gewu* practices, what historian of science Benjamin Elman calls "literati natural studies." These practices, unlike modern science (*kexue*), which would only establish its authority in China several decades later, linked natural studies, natural history, and medicine to more typical forms of classical learning that included literature, moral philosophy, and political history.[19]

The invocation of *gezhi* as a category of knowledge, however, does more than translate Western into Chinese practices; indeed, it leads beyond its own mandate toward

something more closely resembling *kexue*. Yixin and his fellow memorialists do not merely view Western learning through the lens of existing practices as a means of facilitating comprehensibility; their genetic claims ground an argument about how and where Western knowledge could be situated in the past, so as to produce something like that same kind of knowledge in the future. Other strategies employed in the late Qing to clear intellectual and social space for Western science included the assimilation of new knowledge within indigenous philosophical categories, and the affirmation of an eventually universal cultural convergence.[20] But where the latter two establish the new knowledge of science as unthreatening for, because complementary to, existing *ru* learning, the China-origins thesis deliberately situates science (among other things) as a competitor. The shared historical basis it poses between Chinese and Western learning establishes their continuity with each other, such that Western science can no longer be denigrated as a foreign curiosity of superficial instrumentality. Its genetic foundation within Chinese history situates Western math and science within a category of resources—namely, the past intellectual heritage of China—that possess the unique capacity to discipline, extend and transform (versus merely supplement) existing Chinese bodies of knowledge in the present and future. Adopting the vocabulary of the conservative Zhang Shengzao to restate Yixin's argument, we can say that mathematics and science embody *ti* because, in Yixin's view, they possess the capacity to challenge existing forms of Chinese knowledge; they do not assume those forms as prefigured givens to serve them in merely an instrumental way (i.e., act as *yong*).

These capacities for radical displacement were ironically authorized by antiquity itself, understood by most imperial thinkers not as some kind of timeless and monolithic tradition but as a precedent and guide for innovation: in the view of Feng Guifen, the sageliness of the ancient kings lie precisely in their ability to adapt to changing times.[21] For him as for many other reformers, learning from the West formed an identity with "restoring antiquity" (*fu*

gu)²²—and it was fully expected that both promised to incur jarring contrasts with current practice. The past, in other words, necessarily disrupted its seamless continuity with the present to encourage innovation. In much of the China-origins discourse, this paradoxical impulse was explained as "preserving the meaning (*yi*) of the ancients, not their techniques." In arguing for the establishment of a parliamentary system, for example, the young radical Liang Qichao explains: "To model oneself (*fa*) after the first kings is to model oneself after their meanings. The name 'parliament' did not exist in antiquity, but its meaning is that which the wise kings relied upon to bring equality to all under Heaven."²³ The meaningful differences that motivated reform were simultaneously derived from the past yet articulated in the present. "Preserving the meaning of the ancients" ironically constructs a continuity that turns on difference: it is only because we in the present are enough unlike our ancient progenitors that they have something to teach us; and what will be radical transformations of the present have their sanction in the past. The China-as-origins thesis suggests that antiquity itself could authorize change, however much interpretation of that antiquity was subject to ongoing contention and disagreement.²⁴

A passage from the contemporary reformist tract *Sheng shi wei yan*, edited by Zheng Guanying, offers a clearer picture of how the origins thesis functions to turn difference into an encouragement to learn in new ways. The (anonymous) author uses the example of medicine to explain how the relationship of current to ancient knowledge actually works. He argues that while there would be no medicine without the ancient *Internal Classic*, sometimes using its methods to cure illness causes them to worsen, where less conventional urban doctors may try novel methods and succeed in curing the patient. Although cursed as abandoning antiquity, these unconventional doctors "still take ancient methods as fundamental, but change them; they thoroughly grasp ancient methods but transform them.

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They preserve the intention [of the ancients] but do not preserve their methods, and this is why they succeed in curing [the illness] and in exceeding ordinary doctors."[25]

The "ancient" here intends the pursuit of innovative courses of action that build on ancient foundations, but do not mindlessly reproduce their methods. That "new" Western knowledge can enable what reformers expect will be groundbreaking transformations in how the Chinese live and think is *because*, not in spite, of the reformer's inscription of it as ancient knowledge, and *because*, not in spite, of its gross dissimilarity with the present situation. No Chinese reformers of any period expected to find solid continuity between their contemporary situation and the texts, histories, and experiences of their perceived tradition; it was in fact the *disjunctures* between past and present that prompted and—just as importantly—gave direction to reform.

This ironic "continuity of difference" upon which much discussion of the China-origins thesis turned explains why placing Western techno-science and mathematics in the Chinese past could authorize future social and political transformation along novel lines, even if its advocates believed they were preserving Chinese precedents. These considerations posed "Chinese" and "Western" knowledge as distinct categories, but their mutual dissonance enabled the interrogation of the cultural, epistemological, and even psychological borders that contained them. Under these conditions, Chinese engagement with foreign knowledge is neither a simple act of comparison for its own sake nor an exercise in self-reflexivity. Rather, the perceived extremity of the situation prompted consideration of how, if at all, such engagement could proceed as a form of learning—that is, how it could be recognized as an authoritative resource to discipline future innovation. This entailed a re-description of the Chinese past to identify its intellectual contributions and to situate them within what were at the time unprecedented categories of knowledge, even as their particular

recognition of their past as a source of simultaneous continuity and innovation made such a
move possible.

The Significance of Continuity for New Knowledge

For the Yangwu reformers, positing Chinese origins for Western knowledge helped
them establish grounds for the legitimacy of science and mathematics by establishing their
continuity, but also difference, with existing literati knowledge. But how and why is this
claim about origins important? This question takes on special significance as contemporary
political theorists, much like the Yangwu reformers, begin to examine ideas and traditions
that their own practice of knowledge-production has historically marginalized. In these
engagements, tying an idea to its origin seems to constrain rather than facilitate its mobility,
ultimately inhibiting the de-parochialization of existing practice. The Yangwu reformers'
insistence on Chinese origins for Western knowledge thus appears either redundant,
chauvinistic, or purely strategic, unless we can show that it does some kind of analytical work
that claims of mere equivalence cannot.

Chris Goto-Jones has recently argued that genetic claims sustain rather than challenge
parochial discourse within the history of Western philosophy. He criticizes in particular the
views of historians of philosophy such Charles Taylor and Lorenz Kruger, who identify
internal discontinuities within the history of European thought as the only meaningful
inducement to innovation. By labeling non-Western thought as "disconnected" from the
"highways" of Western philosophy, Taylor and Kruger view it as irrelevant or inaccessible to
Western philosophers.[26] Applying the philosophy of history developed by Japanese thinkers
of the Kyoto School, Goto-Jones suggests instead that we create new histories of diverse
origins, which search "back through time and space and select different texts to form a canon
more suitable to the present."[27] "If we can concede that political thinkers from the European

past may have relevance to our present, we must logically concede that the same might be true of figures from non-European pasts; all these pasts are equally foreign countries."[28]

Goto-Jones' description of all pasts—including our own—as "foreign countries" suggests that just as we learn from historical discontinuities within the narrative we claim as our "own," so too must we be able to learn from cultural discontinuities. Both kinds of discontinuity transform us because they are seen simply as iterations of something we are already doing—in this case, fulfilling the "aspirant universalism of philosophy itself."[29] Organizing the history of political thought around competing explanations of particular problems, not around national or regional identities, affirms that "it does not matter who thought of the explanations; what matters is that they were thought of and that they are interesting and relevant."[30]

Yet this approach fails to consider the possibility that problems emerge by way of contrast or contestation with earlier ideas; to even make sense as problems, they must remain continuous with some existing conversation which "permits us to consider a new theory not as a competing alternative but as a corrected continuation of former theories."[31] As Kruger points out, "were it not for Newtonian mechanics and gravitational theory, it would be hard to see how anybody could have discovered general relativity or found its conceptual structure appealing." In other words, continuity supplies the conceptual structure through which novelty can be defended as an intelligible refinement or development of, rather than departure from, some existing practice. Claims about continuity therefore play a role in defining that practice, even as they are at the same time constrained by the discourse that has historically articulated that practice within some given community.[32] This does not disavow otherness, so much as situate it within what above I called a "continuity of difference" that relies on disjunctures with the past to drive innovation in the future.

This continuity of difference distinguishes reformist thought from that of conservatives, such as Woren, who insisted that "the way of establishing a state is to value [Confucian] propriety and righteousness" and denied the need to learn from Western techniques.[33] The continuity Woren sought was not the preservation or revival of the past, so much as the unchanging persistence into the future of present values.[34] In contrast, Yangwu reformers intelligibly invoke the past as a disciplinary resource, understanding that the constant negotiation of the gaps between past and present practice would enable future development.

These observations suggest that genetic claims do a specific kind of work that cannot or is not typically carried out by claims of equivalence. The character of this work is suggested by the reformers' version of the China-origins thesis, which positions otherness in such a way that otherness becomes more able to *discipline* some existing activity rather than become subject to assimilation within it. Both assimilation and discipline identify otherness as meaningfully related to something we are already doing, but there are important contrasts between the two. Assimilation represents difference through a process of equivalence with existing terms. When successful, otherness will come to be represented as a variant of some existing practice, which then expands the definition of the practice: for example, postwar Japanese historical thought will be inscribed as a distinctive iteration of a universal and now-expanded practice called philosophy. In contrast, discipline inscribes the differences presented by otherness as spurs to innovation and refinement within some existing activity (*ru* learning, in the case of Yangwu reformers). Positioned as genetically linked to present inquiry, otherness will not be assuaged through more clearly articulated self-positioning or an enlarged recognition of diversity; rather, it will form the precedent that frames, even as it partially constitutes the substance of, the acquisition of new knowledge called learning.

The Yangwu reformers, as self-conscious advocates of what was called "Western learning," viewed their task as acquiring knowledge *of* precedents so as to enable their analysis to proceed by *means* of them. Learning as they see it is thus not the replication of the past but acquiring the capacity to produce intelligible, compelling future innovation— "going along" as the foreigners do, in the words of Feng Guifen, rather than merely replicating their technologies.[35] Learning from difference, as they do, ascribes that difference with authority to act-as-a-model (*fa*) for their own transformation and inquiry; difference is not simply targeted as a source of new solutions to old questions whose parameters remain uninterrogated. The result is a radical reversal: "The Occident is no longer seen through Confucian lenses, but instead Confucius is understood through Western eyes."[36]

This is why the China-origins thesis functioned more like a political claim to establish continuity with a knowledge community rather than a historical claim about actual origins. Even if Yixin's memorials were "political rhetoric" designed to convince conservatives about the need for reform,[37] the question arises as to why and how locating Chinese origins for Western science would appear to be an effective means of persuading conservatives to learn from the West, as opposed to simply solidifying their chauvinistic attachments to traditional Chinese forms of knowledge. Yixin could have used the thesis of Chinese origins to proclaim Chinese self-sufficiency and superiority, as conservatives such as Zhang Shengzao did in fact do.[38] Or, he could have used his observations about the similarities between Chinese and Western knowledge to ground claims about cultural commensurability or equality, affirm particular practices as generally human rather than culturally specific, or even confirm the universality of some existing theory.

Instead, he uses the thesis to *internalize* Western practices within Chinese history, which effectively makes available Western science as a foundation for intellectual and scientific developments by and for Chinese in the present. By posing Chinese origins for

Western knowledge, that knowledge comes to act much as historically distant canonical texts, alternative interpretations, or simple disagreement *within* any perceived tradition does: it does not invite exclusion or provoke "cultural" dilemmas of difference, so much as pose sources for disciplining further learning, within what participants recognize to be an existing activity of knowledge-production that is *shared* with those who are posing the difference. Continuity between practices, here established across time from past to present, underwrites the continuity of some given body of knowledge by authorizing innovative development within it. It explains why the Chinese reformers elaborated a thesis about *origins* and not simply about shared historical characteristics. Similarities between past and present enable the continued relevance and intelligibility of a given body of thought *as* that body of thought, even as differences facilitate learning in the present and future (rather than simply encouraging reproduction of the past). For the Yangwu reformers, engagements with these "others" are treated as enhancements or enlargements of their capacities as *ru* scholars.

There are significant and fruitful similarities here between the Yangwu move to incorporate Western knowledge into the Chinese past, on the one hand, and the efforts by political theorists claims to render coherent the thought of past thinkers for the purpose of practicing political theory, on the other. Both activities engage (certain kinds of) otherness in what I have above called a "disciplinary" way: that is, they view it not as a particular iteration of some more general activity, but as a source of innovation—where learning more about the activity underwrites and inspires its future development. Convention holds, for example, that the historical, cultural, and idiosyncratic othernesses within the texts of the political theory "canon" do not delineate temporal, cultural, economic or other boundaries between "us" (in the present) and "them" (in the past). Rather, they pose an invitation to theorists in the present to be disciplined by their insights, inspired by their example, incensed by their arguments, or chastened by their lessons. They motivate further shared argument in the field

and in doing so prompt further learning about what it means to undertake this kind of work. These othernesses authorize and enable scholarship recognizable as innovation within— rather than departure from—the field of political theory. Of course, many scholars have observed that not only do political theorists often engage canonical texts in presentist, ahistorical, and even self-serving ways, but that such anachronism is key to creative innovation.[39] Just as importantly, political theorists resist canonical interpretation from the outset, focusing instead on the resolution of contemporary problems, connections to empirical social science, engagement with marginalized political thinkers, and so on. I am trying to make a point less about the content of political theory and more about its approach to that content, namely, the distinct way in which its "others" comprise both subject and object of inquiry. "These authors and their works," as Terence Ball explains it, "comprise an important aspect of our political tradition, which we renew and enrich by reading, reflecting upon, and criticizing those works…. Political theory, perhaps more than any other vocation, takes its own past to be an essential part of its present."[40]

Significantly, however, political theorists for the most part have not attempted, as the Yangwu reformers did, to explore the implications of viewing foreign knowledge as the same kind of internal otherness that disciplines their present inquiry. Recognizing the deeply interconnected webs of meaning and experience that shape discourse in particular places and times, many recent scholars have sought not to learn from such difference so much as to acknowledge it. They read continuity as decisively influential on internal meaning within communities, inhibiting not only the cross-cultural cherry-picking that Goto-Jones defends, but also the radical disciplinization that the Yangwu reformers expected. In what follows, however, I argue that if political theory is constituted by a particular relationship to otherness based on historical continuity, and if it is to subvert rather than support the parochialism

Goto-Jones rightly decries, its practitioners should consider the Yangwu strategy of establishing continuities with the histories of others that it has historically marginalized.

Political Theory and its Others

Recent work in "comparative political theory" has facilitated deeper self-reflection on the biases of European thought in general and mainstream political theory in particular—leading some scholars to argue that the practice of political theory is, itself, inherently comparative. Roxanne Euben's book *Journeys to the Other Shore*, for example, defends theory as a broadly comparative practice in which critical distance—facilitated, among other things, by the displacement of both real and imagined travel, encounters with otherness, and self-reflection—plays an integral role.[41] She focuses her study of Islamic travel narratives not on ideas, but on subjectivities—those grammars of representation through which humans organize experience into comprehensible narratives—to examine what those practices disclose about how her particular Muslim and Western subjects "make sense of themselves and the worlds through which they move."[42]

The point for Euben, as for many comparative political theorists, is not to frame their work within these "grammars." Nor is it typically to advance a literal "comparison between civilizational worldviews,"[43] which would require identifying prefigured and distinct political doctrines in a way that many comparative theorists would disavow as impossible or essentialist. Rather, their collective gesture draws attention to how the field's historical privileging of certain thought over others inhibits serious self-reflection about our place in a globalizing world and at worst reproduces dangerously hegemonic assumptions.[44] The historical marginalization of non-Western traditions and intellectual claims within academic discourse are thus portrayed as problems of representation, rectification of which involves

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unsettling accepted understandings about both self and other within political theory to render the discipline, and ourselves, more attentive to its own limitations and possibilities.[45]

Most theorists believe that this transformation turns on understanding others "on their own terms, or at least on as close to their own terms as is possible for an interpreter whose position is exterior to the worldview of the subject."[46] In an earlier defense of this position, advanced in the context of how modern academics can understand a "primitive society" (here the Zande of Africa) who believe in witchcraft, Peter Winch explains

> It may be true, as [Alisdair] MacIntyre says, that the Zande do not have the categories of science and non-science…. But a much more important fact to emphasize is that *we* do not initially have a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic. Since it is we who want to understand the Zande category, it appears that the onus is on us to extend our understanding so as to make room for the Zande category, rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own ready-made distinction between science and non-science.[47]

Winch's discussion shows explicitly that to understand others on their own terms, theorists do not seek to "live" the new mode of life from which non-Western thought emerges, so much as to transform their own language by enlarging its capacity to represent that otherness, or by "disturbing" that language enough to awaken heightened self-awareness.[48] Here, political theory's relationship to foreign thought very much resembles that of the ethnographer as Talal Asad describes it:

> Learning to live a new mode of life [as the ethnographer does in the field] is not the same as learning about another mode of life. When anthropologists return to their

countries, they must write up 'their people,' and they must do so in the conventions of representation already circumscribed (already 'written around,' 'bounded') by their discipline, institutional life, and wider society. 'Cultural translation' must accommodate itself to a different language not only in the sense of English as opposed to Dinka, or English as opposed to Kabbashi Arabic, but also in the sense of a British, middle class, academic game as opposed to the modes of life of the 'tribal' Sudan… The translation is addressed to a very specific audience, which is waiting to read about another mode of life and to manipulate the text it reads according to established rules, not to learn to live a new mode of life.[49]

The work of the ethnographer, Asad insists, lies in this very work of representation. Ethnographers do not actually "produce the original," or offer "transformed instances of the original," but simply craft "authoritative textual representations of it."[50] As Charles Taylor explains, "we master the agent's self-description in order to identify our *explananda*; but it by no means requires that we couch our *explanantia* in the same language," which is meaningfully separate from our objects of inquiry.[51]

Asad raises these alternative possibilities of "original production" not to pursue them, but to make the same point Euben makes when she positions her examination of Muslim political thought within a world "remade" by colonialism[52]: to draw attention to the fact that their task effectively represents (what is often) a subordinated other within a discourse whose hegemonic status must be carefully interrogated. This interrogation is necessary, ironically, because the representations of culture manufactured here are not addressed to anyone in the culture under scrutiny, but rather are supplied to fellow scholars of the discipline that frames the representation. Accordingly, the capacity to contest the representation—which Asad claims is the minimal criteria for all responsible critique[53]—rests not with those whom it is

representing or "inscribing," nor does it turn on their standards of legitimate knowledge. Rather, the capacity rests with fellow members of the discipline, whose own criteria of adequacy interrogate the authority of those who, like themselves, "write" the culture of others.[54]

My point in raising Asad's arguments is certainly not to make claims about ethnography. I mean only to bring into focus how closely recent engagements with cultural others in political theory resemble similar engagements of the ethnographer, as Asad describes them. In most of these cases, difference does not *discipline* existing (Western, Anglophone, academic) thought. It simply enables greater perspective on the limits of its self-sufficiency by "unsettling presently shared meanings," not adopting new ones.[55] These recent efforts do reflect upon the Eurocentrism of conventional political theory, but largely by *representing* non-Western thought in the third-person. This is certainly true of more literal comparative moves undertaken by Andrew March and Michael Freeden, who arrange distinct claims or beliefs within a comparative framework that assumes rather than interrogates the disciplinary platform that makes such claims tenable.[56] But it is equally true of those scholars, such as Euben and Godrej, who use comparison to disturb the self-positioning that shores up the ethnocentric claims of political theory. In both cases, it is other political theorists who are left to judge whether or how marginalized or non-Western voices square with what they take to be existing disciplinary concerns. For Godrej, for example, "representation" is the process by which a political theorist interested in non-Western thought moves from her ethnographic tasks to the production of "cosmopolitan political thought": she "construct[s] cultural accounts in order to represent the experience of the [non-Western] text…articulating how these insights may be used to illumine *our* political life."[57] Neither kind of comparison marshals the intellectual contexts from which such voices emerge to ground future knowledge-production in ways that may ultimately overturn existing practice.

To restate this using vocabulary I have developed above, comparative political theory has so far succeeded in assimilating foreign thought within the existing activity of political theory, enabling more to be said about the limitations, and transforming the content, of that activity. However, the "otherness" of such thought does not come to serve as the kind of otherness that disciplines what it means to perform political theory—it rather remains "subaltern" in the sense that it never enters academic knowledge-production as belonging to the point of view of the political theorist herself.[58] For this reason, it is hard to see how the process of representation into our language—the dynamic series of comparisons and contrasts that constitute translation—can ever truly be executed "on their terms" rather than in ours.

The risk of such displacement is often deliberately avoided, in fact, by assuaging cultural otherness through recourse to specialized means—such as "cross-cultural dialogue"—not usually applied to ordinary learning from our own "canon" or existing conversations. Euben, for example, presumes that such a technique is helpful precisely because, in evaluating non-Western thought, "we" typically stand outside the worldview of our "subjects."[59] Yet to treat cultural otherness in this way would be to ignore how mainstream political theory itself confronts otherness as a necessary part of its practice. It is *not* a "fact" of political theory, as it is perhaps for anthropology, that "'we are using other people for our own purposes all the time.'"[60] When we produce theory, we seek guidance from these (particular) others in such a way that our very inquiry comes to be constituted by projects they have already set out; this is how we *become* "Marxists" or "liberals" or "post-structuralists." As JGA Pocock explains, the scholar of political thought-traditions "acknowledges that the subject-matter of his study forms a tradition in which he is involved,"[61] such that producing novel theory means establishing continuity with the pursuits of those very others whose ideas we examine, however much we may ultimately diverge from them in terms of method or content. We look to these past authors to learn from them,

to "go on as they do"; the process is not "an antiquarian venture" so much "as a form of political education."[62]

Quentin Skinner has famously denied the possibility of finding answers to our own (present) questions from past others, advising instead that "we must learn to do our thinking for ourselves." Yet he goes on to explain that the whole point of maintaining historical fidelity in our examination of past thought is to teach us, in the present, a lesson about the contingency and historicity of our own ideas and practices.[63] Although Cambridge school historians like Skinner are careful to preserve the historical distinctiveness of particular problems and so maintain their estranging distance from us, they too overcome the otherness of their subjects by reading them into a genealogy of knowledge that extends backward from our present circumstances.[64] This is why, as Goto-Jones insightfully notes, Cambridge school historians tend to focus on discontinuities and estrangements that "lie within European history rather than outside it."[65] The implication is that these *particular* differences shed light on "our" modern predicaments in ways an examination of thought outside this genealogy presumably would not. As Skinner explains, "if the study of intellectual history is to have the kind of use I am claiming for it, there must be some deeper level at which our present values and the seemingly alien assumptions of our forebears to some degree match up."[66] He echoes Charles Taylor, who argues that only by retrieving alternatives in *our* past can we can gain traction on the status quo of the present—what Taylor calls "common sense"— because it is against these historical alternatives that our present understanding implicitly defends itself as superior.[67] That is, theorists try to get these particular "others" right because they have something to teach them *qua* theorists; it is not because they have a detached intellectual interest in documenting the content or influence of those others for purely historical reasons. "As a rule we come to Locke or Rousseau not because we want to

know 'all about' them or their texts or their times, but because we are puzzled about something."[68]

Stated differently, political theory seeks not (merely) to represent or translate these others, but to "contest" them, in Asad's sense; that is, theorists engage these others in such a way that differences—both between and among texts and interpreters—serve merely to demonstrate the inclusion of both sides in a shared community of argument. The otherness of its own source material presents particularities simultaneously continuous with, yet irreducible to, already-existing lines of argument. This description of political theory's "others" parallels Yangwu understandings of Western learning. Continuity supplies the frame of intelligibility through which a community becomes able to define its activities, but it also facilitates learning because it inscribes otherness as a difference whose challenges that that activity, by historical default, must necessarily encompass and remain perpetually open to. Just as what we take to be our own past heritage of thought fundamentally *constitutes*, rather than merely influences, our present production of knowledge, so too will situating foreign thought within the genetic narrative of our past. In fact, if theorists are not to be ethnographers when engaging foreign thought, it seems they *must* register foreign thought as sources of learning, and that means situating it as indigenous source material. This internalization of foreign thought effectively explodes the foreign/indigenous dichotomies that were its original motivation. But more importantly, as Yixin has shown, such internalization resists subordinating that thought to a category of practice (*yong*, "technique") that by definition is supplementary rather than fundamentally transformative—an object of assimilation rather than a subject of discipline.

Implications

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These explorations suggest that if political theorists are to remain true to their own self-definition in the confrontation with foreign thought, they are implicated in the same tensions about genetic claims that vexed the "China-as-origin" thesis. When the work of foreign others—however painstakingly its existence is acknowledged—stands merely as incitements to self-reflection or enhancements of existing vocabularies, rather than as comprehensible, potentially compelling, and internally reflective communities of argument that incur their own disciplinary regimes, then political theory is not engaging them as it usually engages its "others": as both existing constituents of a shared discourse of argument and as disciplinary resources for intelligible innovation in the future.

With respect to this process, the China-origins thesis offers two counter-intuitive insights. First, it suggests that in the encounter with foreign thought we turn not to the application of wholly new or different ontologies that present constraints to the engagement, but first consider how existing, 'internal' othernesses sustain shared argument in a received tradition, whether orthodox *ru* learning or political theory. These othernesses discipline as they alienate, which means their distance from "us" in our time and place, far from occluding understanding, is one of the very conditions under which any body of thought can be (re-) produced as a field of research. Yangwu arguments exhibit a sophisticated awareness of how claims about continuity with past practices are necessary to underwrite novel practices as continuations of existing or past ones, rather than departures from them. For Dipesh Chakrabarty, the capacity of otherness to illuminate present thought lies in making that otherness contemporary, so as to pluralize our existence and bring into view the disjointed nature of any particular 'now' that we inhabit.[69] In contrast, however, Yangwu arguments suggest that disciplinary resources are effective precisely because they inhabit a past we presume to share with them. This continuity makes possible specific kinds of differences

between past and present, to render sensible the possibility of learning from (rather than timelessly repeating) the past.

Second, and ironically, the thesis also shows that establishing continuity with an existing body of knowledge positions otherness as disciplinary—and as such may threaten the present form of that body of knowledge. But when those othernesses are integrated within a conversation that can register them as relevant kinds of differences—that is, when they come to have disciplinary authority over what it is we take to be our present activity, and are not perceived as something either completely unrelated, or merely equivalent, to what we are already doing—they *constitutively transform* our existing criteria of judgment. It is very important to remember that Yangwu claims to Chinese continuity with Western knowledge were almost entirely spurious. But they reveal that to be disciplined by new knowledge, we must see its terms as decisive precedents for our future utterances, and if we are to learn in this way, we must act as if Chinese thought has a Western origin: that it is "ours." The solution to truly learning from foreign thought, then, is not to endow the present with the power to create new histories—and so develop, as Goto-Jones and others have argued, new canons to suit a more globalized world.[70] Rather, we must develop fidelity to "the cognitive path[s] of experience and theorizing" blazed by others in their different pasts—paths which likely exist parallel to, rather than already-within, political theory.[71]

The irony is that in so doing, we—like the Yangwu reformers—supplant the very resources that underwrote such a move in the first place. Because of the ways in which our thinking emerges out of conversations and histories that both enable and constrain it, choosing to engage non-Western thought on the basis of what "fits the needs and realities of our present world" cannot, as Goto-Jones argues that it can, furnish self-evident selection criteria for inclusion of non-Western voices in new "world-historical" philosophical canons. If our existing, Eurocentric criteria—including criteria for what constitutes "interesting" and

"relevant" selection— are not to remain hegemonic, they too must be subject to deparochialization, and cannot be inscribed as prefigured givens that act independently on the encounter without themselves being transformed by it. If the encounter is to be truly disciplinary rather than merely assimilative, our very criteria of relevance and similarity must be interrogated.

Reframed within these dilemmas of cross-cultural learning, the China-origins thesis appears as a sensible response to a question that may not admit of any easy answer. If we assume that historical precedents do not matter, and that we can learn in piecemeal ways from a variety of bodies of knowledge because we are all participating in some universal activity usually labeled "philosophy" or "theory," we risk failing to interrogate the ethnocentric conditions governing the very identity of these supposedly universal activities. If we assume that our own knowledge-production is so historically inflected that we can never learn from differently situated others in precisely the same ways that we learn from our own canons, then we are unable to open our own inquiry to the risks those others pose. Posing spurious origins for foreign knowledge points to a fruitful third way between these two approaches. It enables us to include foreign others in our existing conversations by recognizing how and that their continuities—not simply their discrete ideas—enable future innovation. By situating such knowledge as an internal source of otherness our own activities become continuous with theirs, with the ironic result that their terms, not ours, enable future knowledge production.

[1] That is, "Western" as the reformers themselves identified it. The Tychonic astronomical and mathematical methods introduced by Jesuits in the seventeenth century now appeared sufficiently obsolete, highlighting the foreignness and novelty of contemporary European, post-Newtonian and machine-driven science. See Benjamin Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), Part IV.

[2] e.g., Fred Dallmayr, "Beyond Monologue: For a Comparative Political Theory," *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (2004): 249-257; Andrew March, "What is Comparative Political Theory?" *Review of Politics* 71, No. 4 (Fall 2009): 531-565.

[3] e.g., Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Farah Godrej, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought: The Hermeneutics of Interpreting the Other," *Polity* 41 (2009).

[4] Theodore Huters, *Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 24.

[5] Quan Hansheng, "Qing mo de 'Xixue yuan chu Zhongguo' shuo," in *Zhongguo jindai shi luncong* 1, vol. 5, ed. Bao Zunpeng et al. (Taibei: Zhongzheng, 1956), 222-3; Sun, *Wan Qing chuantong yu Xihua de zhenglun* (Taibei: Shangwu, 1982), 74.

[6] Quan, "Qing mo de 'Xixue,'" 223, 241.

[7] Joseph Needham, *The Great Titration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969); but cf Lynn White, "Review of *Science and Civilization in China*," *Isis* 75 (March 1984):172-179.

[8] Huters, *Bringing the World Home*, 24-5; Sun Guangde, *Wan Qing chuantong*, 73.

[9] Paul A. Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1974), 180. Similar claims for the native origins of foreign ideas have appeared elsewhere:

Michael Lackner, "*Ex Oriente Scientia*? Reconsidering the Ideology of a Chinese Origin of Western Knowledge," *Asia Major* 21.2 (2008): 183-200, 184.

[10] Memorials (*zou zhe*) are "secret, personal reports on non-routine public business, sent directly to the Throne by high officials from the provinces or central government units." [Philip Kuhn and John K. Fairbank, *Introduction to Ch'ing Documents*, Part I, 1993 rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard-Yanching Institute, 1993), 6]. All memorials and imperial edicts (*shang yu*) cited here are taken from the collection *Yangwu yun dong* [hereafter YW], Zhongguo shixue hui, eds., vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 1961).

[11] YW, 24.

[12] YW, 25.

[13] Feng, *Jiaobin lu kangyi* (Taipei: Wenhai), 158-9.

[14] YW, 23.

[15] Woren is referring to the non-degree-holders who worked as engineers, translators, and builders with European Protestant missionaries in China's burgeoning factories and arsenals; see Meng Yue, "Hybrid Science versus Modernity: The Practice of the Jiangnan Arsenal, 1864-1897," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 16 (1999): 13-52, 24-31.

[16] YW, 29.

[17] YW, 30.

[18] YW, 25.

[19] Elman, "'Universal Science' versus 'Chinese Science': The Changing Identity of Natural Studies in China," *Historiography East and West* 1.1 (2003): 69-116, 95; Wang Hui, "The Fate of 'Mr. Science' in China," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 3 (Spring 1995): 1-68, 12.

[20] As elaborated in David C. Reynolds, "Redrawing China's Intellectual Map: Images of Science in Nineteenth-Century China." *Late Imperial China* 12 (June 1991): 27-61, 38.

[21] Feng Guifen, *Jiaobin lu kangyi*, 6-7.

[22] Quan, "Qing mo de 'Xixue,'" 224.

[23] Liang Qichao, "Gu yi yuan kao," cited in Quan, "Qing mo de 'Xixue,'" 241.

[24] Earlier reformers who urged the adoption of Western technology for "self-strengthening," including Gong Zizhen and Wei Yuan, also explicitly invoked the past as a precedent for present reform (Ding and Chen, *Zhong ti xi yong zhijian*, 16).

[25] Cited in Quan, "Qing mo de 'Xixue,'" 252-3.

[26] Goto-Jones, "The Kyoto School," 27-28.

[27] Ibid., 22.

[28] Ibid., 17-18.

[29] Ibid., 28.

[30] Ibid., 30. C.f. similar claims in Euben, *Enemy*; and March, "What is Comparative Political Theory?" 558.

[31] "Why Do We Study the History of Philosophy?" in *Philosophy in History,* 93.

[32] Taylor, "Social Theory as Practice," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[33] YW, 30.

[34] YW, 34-5; See also Yixin's reply to Woren, YW, 36-7.

[35] Feng Guifen, *Jiao bin lu kang yi*, 152.

[36] Lackner, "*Ex Oriente Scientia*?" 196.

[37] Huters, *Bringing the World Home*, 31.

[38] YW, 28-29; Sun Guangde, *Wan Qing chuantong*, 75.

[39] Margaret Leslie, "In Praise of Anachronism," *Political Studies* 18 (1970).

[40] Ball, "History and the Interpretation of Texts," in Gerald Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, eds. *Handbook of Political Theory* (London: Sage, 2004), 19, 28.

[41] Euben, *Journeys*, 11.

[42] Euben, *Journeys*, 7-9.

[43] As in March, "What is Comparative Political Theory?" 552.

[44] Godrej, "Response," 577.

[45] Farah Godrej, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Political Thought"; Charles Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[46] Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 12 and 155, 156; see also Taylor, "Understanding," 119.

[47] Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (Oct., 1964): 307-324, 319.

[48] E.g., Taylor, "Understanding," 125-6; Godrej, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Political Thought," 164.

[49] Asad, "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 159.

[50] Asad, "Cultural Translation," 159.

[51] Taylor, "Understanding," 118.

[52] *Enemy*, 12.

[53] Asad, "Cultural Translation," 156.

[54] Asad and others, including James Clifford, do emphasize dialogic methods of representation to transform the "cultural" text into a "speaking object": Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture*, 14-17.

[55] E.g., Fred Dallmayr, *Alternative Visions* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield,1998), 114.

[56] March, "What is Comparative Political Theory?"; Freeden, "The Comparative Study of Political Thinking," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12, no. 1 (2007).

[57] Godrej, "Towards a Cosmopolitan Political Thought," 164, italics my own.

[58] As theorized in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), 97-8.

[59] Euben, *Enemy*, 12-13; see also Godrej, "Toward a Cosmopolitan Political Thought," 139.

[60] Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," 164.

[61] "The History of Political Thought: A Methodological Inquiry," in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman, eds. *Philosophy, Politics, and Society, 2nd Series* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 184.

[62] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 26.

[63] "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969):199-215, 66.

[64] James Tully, "Political Philosophy as a Critical Activity," *Political Theory* 30 (2002): 533-55, 549.

[65] Goto-Jones, "The Kyoto School," 27.

[66] *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 177; David Runciman, "History of Political Thought: State of the Discipline," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 3 (April 2001): 84-104, 91.

[67] Taylor, "Philosophy and its History," 22-4.

[68] Terence Ball, "History and the Interpretation of Texts," 24.

[69] *Provincializing Europe*, 108-9.

[70] Goto-Jones, "The Kyoto School," 32-5.

[71] The quote is appropriated from Kruger, "Why do we study the history of philosophy?" 94.