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BOOK REVIEW

Chinese Cosmopolitanism: The History and Philosophy of an Idea

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By way of her "Introduction," Shuchen Xiang commences *Chinese Cosmopolitanism: The History and Philosophy of an Idea* forthrightly and impressively with a succinct articulation of the four aims or motives that have compelled her to write her provocative book. First is Xiang's view that the West has implicitly and chronically misunderstood "the Chinese historical view of the 'other,'" and should understand it now, in our times of a globally ascendant China. Second, with the unstated implication that China will constitute a historical epitome, Xiang wishes to demonstrate that the customary "colonialism, genocide, racial violence, hatred" by which the "other" has been victimized are not expressions of a misanthropy innate to human nature but instead are culturally contingent. Third, despite the growing currency of "the Western discourse of race," especially within the non-Chinese academic community of sinologists, Xiang will expose its inapplicability to the traditional Chinese context. Fourth and finally, Xiang hopes to show "that Chinese philosophy is of relevance in thinking about contemporary issues related to pluralism" (2), emphasizing its utility and the value of its lessons. Each of these four aspirations comes with its own unique set of daunting evidentiary challenges and, throughout her book, Shuchen Xiang shrinks from none of them. Most crucially, however, Xiang concludes her introduction by defining "cosmopolitanism" as the disposition "that diversity is enriching" (24). She corroborates this definition with the opinion of the Négritude Movement founder and career-long anticolonialism commentator Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), who wrote that cosmopolitanism involves "'a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars'" (25). Finally, Xiang contrasts cosmopolitanism with a brief discussion of "racism," because one of her cardinal arguments for cosmopolitanism is to argue, correspondingly, "that traditional China had no concept of 'race'" (26).

In Chapter 1, Shuchen Xiang presents a brief history of her pivotal term *Chinese cosmopolitanism*. She first targets and debunks three misconceptions that undergird the myth, so prevalent in the West, of an "unchanging China." Succinctly put, these fallacies are 1) that of China's primeval and invariant racial homogeneity; 2) that of a mono-directional Sinicization or absorption of non-Chinese peoples into the Chinese identity; and yet antithetically 3) that there never was a "China" consisting of a consummately integrated identity but instead only one of aggregated local polities. Xiang contends

that these misconceptions have persisted because the "ontologically bivalent dualisms" of the Western worldview have precluded any full grasp of "the nondualistic Chinese worldview" (29–30). Thereafter, Xiang resorts chiefly to China's own history but also especially to ancient Greek intercultural analogies to rebut these misconceptions, which she finds to lie at the root of a litany of fallacies about Chinese cosmopolitanism. Among these falsehoods are Western misidentifications, such as that of Chinese historical expansion with conventional colonialism; and mischaracterizations, such as that of regional cultural domination achieved by the exercise of might and threat of force, as it was achieved in the West. Xiang deftly overturns these fallacies by, for instance, discussing how values classically shared by the West and China—such as hierarchy—nonetheless differed: the Platonic concept being that of rank ontologically determined by birthright, and the Confucian concept evolving to become that of rank being established by ethical criteria and faithfulness in fulfilling the obligations of one's social role. Xiang's brief concluding discussion of cultural syncretism naturally relies on the example of the Tang dynasty (618–907), which everyone knowledgeable considers China's earliest cosmopolitan age.

Chapters 2 and 3 of *Chinese Cosmopolitanism* form a pair or diptych. In the second chapter, Shuchen Xiang presents a succinct, unabashed, and unflinchingly unflattering summary of the classic Western—that is, Greco-Christian and consummately European—reception of the "barbarian." She finds this Western apprehension of and about the "barbarian" to have most consistently consisted of a paradigm of Manichaean demonization, wherein—within a fraught dualistic relationship—to the barbarous "other" was attributed all things bad or evil. She argues persuasively that it was precisely this dualism that gave rise to and fueled colonialism: the act of colonizing itself became tantamount to holy war because its goal was nothing less than to exorcise evil, as embodied by the "other." As Xiang starkly asserts, "It is important to recognize the deep-seated nature of the often subconscious paradigm of the barbarian in the Western tradition, as the assumption of a Manichaean foe (barbarian) as the inverse of the good is a key element in the structure of Western racism" (84).

However, in the complementary but also adversative third chapter, as an antidote, Xiang broaches the all-important distinctions between the classical Western and the Chinese perceptions of the barbarian "other." She introduces her concept of "processual holism" as uniquely Chinese and in every way antipodal to the Western view on the "barbarian" and on "nonhuman" beings. In defining "holism," Shuchen Xiang relies on like-minded sinological theorists—Joseph Needham (Organism), Eric Nelson (holistic naturalism), Brook Ziporyn (Daoist wholeness)—who have propounded similar concepts. Beyond philosophy, in making the case for this foundational idea of processual holism, Xiang also argues from the standpoint of biology. Her basic point is that whereas "the existence of noncontinuous, ontological hierarchies" has typified the Western understanding of the world, "the Chinese worldview is characterized by the assumption that all particulars are *ziran* [自然] (*sponte sua*), that order is emergent, and that all things are interrelated" (90). In Xiang's view, such processual holism explains why, in Chinese metaphysics, "humans are not seen as radically distinct from the rest of the natural continuum" in contrast to "the great preoccupation with distinguishing between humans, animals, and plants in the early Greek tradition" (100). In the rest of the book, the most important point about "processual holism" is its capacity for nullifying the barbarian through acculturation (104).

In Chapter 4, Shuchen Xiang presents a longitudinal historical analysis of the Western worldview, which by this time in her study has become equated with the Great Chain of Being (thereafter and hereafter, GCB) paradigm of A.O. Lovejoy

(1873–1962). As Xiang writes, "Since the GCB was the operative European assumption for millennia, it is no surprise that the European encounter with difference historically led to both the hierarchization of difference and the violent domination of difference" (117). In making her case, Xiang resorts to numerous examples, such as the Amerindian confrontation with colonialism, beginning with the Spanish conquistadors and including American anti-black racism, largely interpreted through the lens of the social commentary of the litterateur James Baldwin (1924–1987). Xiang concludes that the GCB's importance appears in two influential results: "First, Europeans were able to ontologically justify the domination of difference, since they believed that those higher in the hierarchy dominate those lower in the hierarchy. This view gave way to the idea that there are just wars. Second, metaphysical determinism justifies violently forcing novelty to fit a preconceived picture of the world" (127).

Xiang introduces the next two chapters with the claim that the Western ordering of the universe premised on a platform of violent domination is not shared by Chinese convention of "processual holism." Chapters 5 and 6 of *Chinese Cosmopolitanism* explore the dissimilar understandings of efficacy and virtue, respectively, within the two traditions. In Chapter 5, the operative framework that Xiang has chosen for the scrutiny of efficacy is that of colonialism, largely as interpreted by Edward Said (1935–2003). Said pronounced that, prior to being a practice, colonialism was an ideology. Using any of the Americas as a concrete example, Xiang agrees, observing "that before the Portuguese or the Spanish knew anything about the newly discovered continent, they were already thinking about how to dominate it" (129). Throughout much of the chapter, Xiang alternates between such descriptions of the European colonialist mindset and assertions of Chinese colonialist *dis*inclination; for instance, the Sui dynasty (589–618) knew of Byzantium (Fulin 拂菻), but did not consider intruding upon it, nor invading it. Key to her discussion at all times is that the Chinese failure to engage in exploitive colonialist aggression in any age stemmed not from incapability but instead from indisposition to do so. From this truism, Xiang concludes that the contrasting Western and Chinese concepts of efficacy appear mostly clearly with respect to war. In the West, efficacy means complete victory, as exemplified by *On War* by Karl von Clausewitz (1780–1831). In China, true efficacy, contrarily and ironically, meant attaining harmony (*he* 和), as is repeatedly stressed in the seminal classic of the Warring States era (ca. 475–221 BCE), *Sunzi's Art of War* (*Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法).

Chapter 6 addresses overtly the question of virtue, becoming something of a manifesto advocating the metaphysics of harmony over that of colonialism. Much of Xiang's advocacy both hinges and centers on the term *de* 德. *De* has been the term for "virtue" used longest and most frequently, within both Chinese tradition generally and Confucian tradition in particular. *De* also translates as "power," a usage Xiang associates more closely with the Western conception of efficacy (186). The strongest and most significant section within the chapter is Xiang's exposure of the perniciousness of colonialism and the role of Confucianism in combatting or at least blunting it. She writes:

> There is strong reason to believe that the Confucian understanding of efficacy and virtue (self-improvement to increase one's moral gravitas so that others are drawn to one's example) helped to discourage the kind of colonizing and genocidal conduct given free rein in the Western world (where efficacy and virtue is shown in imposing one's moral paradigms on recalcitrant others). The Confucian model of efficacy and virtue, we could argue, informed the traditional Chinese ideal model of foreign policy (181).

In summing up her various contentions in the "Conclusion," which is followed by an very brief "Glossary," Suchen Xiang provides a schematic distillation of the so-called "killer apps" of Chinese cosmopolitanism that are intended to "expose the (literal) 'kill apps' of Western racism" (190). Significantly and to her credit, in concluding, Xiang does not try to deny all Chinese proclivity toward violence. As she writes, "Chinese history was created by flawed human beings who were capable of as much violence and cruelty as any other human being." Yet, as she adds, they "never channeled their aggression toward a perceived racial other, as they did not have the constellation of ideas of barbarism, racism and ontological hierarchy that governed the Western tradition" (194). While Xiang may be right that Chinese people have historically not maintained an innate tendency toward racism, her contention that Chinese have customarily had no concept of race might not be at all true.

My major criticism of *Chinese Cosmopolitanism* is that it presumptively conflates cosmopolitanism, in every instance and at every turn, with unreserved toleration for the barbarian "other." Or, to lodge the critique differently but perhaps in a more fruitful way, Shuchen Xiang neglects the fact that everywhere it has ever been operative, cosmopolitanism in practice, not unlike colonialism, has demanded certain standards or terms of engagement as impetuses for the successful acceptance and integration of the "other." As Xiang herself writes,

> Under the traditional and processual Confucian Chinese metaphysical view of the self as a human becoming … humaneness is not a congenital and eternal essence, but a quality acquired through acculturation and the practice of culturally appropriate actions. Under this view, those who are (initially) perceived to be other can always *become* acculturated according to Chinese norms and so become Chinese (104).

True. Yet, although this articulation of the process is devoid of colonialist predation, in presupposing the unquestioned and absolute superiority—in every instance and at all times—of the *Chinese* way of life, is it not culturally supremacist? In ways that Xiang has not accounted for, Chinese cosmopolitanism always seems to require the barbarian forsaking or shedding all or most preexisting native cultural identity and embeddedness in exchange for Chineseness. Is not such one-way acculturation cultural imperialism?

Despite this foregoing criticism, there is still no diminishing the value of what Shuchen Xiang has achieved through *Chinese Cosmopolitanism*. Given its longstanding knowledge of foreign lands and peoples, many of which were ripe for exploitation, and its recognizable capacity over the ages for imposing its will especially in far-flung places beyond Inner and East Asia militarily whenever it could have elected to, exactly why China chose not to do so is a conundrum. Xiang has isolated and explicated in depth one reason for Chinese restraint that may prove more compelling, determinative, and influential on our understanding of this noninterventionist attitude than any other. In sum, the lack of wherewithal has historically factored far less in why China has failed to colonize the world than its abiding cultural unwillingness to do so, or even antipathy toward doing so.