

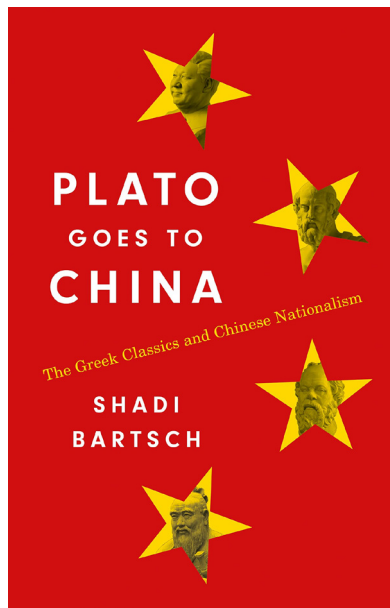
Book Review

Plato Goes to China. The Greek Classics and Chinese Nationalism

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The popularity of British universities amongst students from China attests to a keen interest in Western academe, especially in STEM subjects. The engaging title of the book, 'Plato Goes to China' suggests that this interest extends to philosophy and the arts too, and promises to satisfy one's curiosity on this score. It more than lives up to its promise. It is a revelation.

This book, based on the author's four Martin lectures delivered at Oberlin College in 2018, is an even-handed exploration of the ways in

which Chinese academics have interpreted Classical Greek political theory and practice, and have compared them with their own over the past century. The reader is at once eager to find out what the Chinese make of the ways in which Greek political philosophy has been applied in the West.

In a closely argued exposition, the author, Professor Shadi Bartsch, traces the vicissitudes in the Chinese system over the last 100 years. She begins by reminding us that the first step towards Chinese–Western engagement was taken by the Jesuits in the 16th century. They introduced Plato and Aristotle into China as well as Christianity, by pointing out parallels already present in Confucianism. Hence it is not surprising to learn that at the time of the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, when the Chinese began to cast about for alternative forms of government, they turned their attention to Plato, Aristotle and Thucydides as having much to say on the matter. The West, after all, had inherited their thinking and had proceeded by way of the Enlightenment to scientific advances

and prosperity. A new relationship was considered in which Chinese subjects would become citizens as in Aristotle's *Politics*.

The author recounts that this model of government, based on citizenship, was to influence the May 4th Movement in 1919 and was to be fundamental to the ongoing debate in China. The contributions of many Chinese philosophers are discussed throughout the book. We are told, however, that the nascent movement towards building a democratic nation state was halted by other forces of history, namely Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party. It had to wait until 1988 when a more indulgent period prevailed under Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping. He, however, spooked by events, reneged on his reformist plans and ordered a crackdown on the student rally in Tiananmen Square.

The Chinese reaction was to reaffirm their faith in the precepts taught by Confucius, bringing into being a neo-Confucian and nationalist China. This time around, the Greek Classics underwent a complete reappraisal. True though it is that some Chinese Classicists study the subject for the love of it (as we do!), others see the Classics as useful precedents for assessing ideas to be adapted or rejected. Some discerning criticisms have been highlighted by the author. For example, one scholar claims that Athenian democracy was a brief interlude and American democracy has yet to stand the test of time. In any case, according to the critics, Plato does not advocate democracy and neither does Thucydides who both point out the pitfalls of rhetoric and manipulation on the part of democratic leaders. As for Aristotle, he has been removed from his pedestal for his views on slavery. There is a challenge, which must be addressed, that Western democracy is not the only kind and that it is fraught with imperfections. Oh for the power to see ourselves as others see us!

Halfway through the book the author concentrates on the man who inspired the title. She deals in particular with his doctrine of the Noble Lie in the *Republic*, whereby everyone has their station in life according to the metal in their constitution. Gold for the rulers of course! It seems though that both Chinese scholars as well as their Western counterparts are faced with a paradox. In the case of China, hierarchy and meritocracy are all very well, but whatever happens to the Communist interpretation of equality? The problem is to be solved by having recourse to Confucius' teachings about respect for authority and tradition. In real life, however, how do you get rid of a ruler who does not meet the gold standard? Well, the Chinese system is predicated on the belief that human nature is basically good, whereas the West, thanks to Christianity, so it is said, believes the opposite.

Apparently, before the crackdown of 1988, Chinese scholars were not in favour of Plato's portrayal of the ideal state, but with the revival of Confucianism and the cult of leadership many now approve it. In a particularly intriguing twist, the author ponders as to whether thinkers on both sides believe that noble lies are employed in their state too. We shall never know, perhaps.

In another area of dispute, China is sceptical of the West's rationality which all began with Plato in the *Republic*. The West is accused of prioritising expediency over morality. It seems that some Chinese scholars have the starry-eyed view that Confucian-style value rationality leads to the ethical life and is superior to the West's instrumental rationality, whereby human needs are often left out of the equation. At the beginning of this millennium one branch

of the Chinese intelligentsia, in keeping with the back to basics agenda, alighted upon the appeal by Leo Strauss to the traditional values promoted in the Western Classics as opposed to the liberal relativism of modern times.

These standards have a neat match with Confucianism. Conferences hosted by Greece and China sought to find common ground between Socrates and Confucius. The conclusion seems to have been that Socrates' argumentation and Confucian ethics both play their part but, unsurprisingly, the Chinese thought that Confucius had the edge on Socrates.

The concluding chapter succinctly summarises the trains of thought covered in this work. The book itself is a testament to how theories can be interpreted to serve the purpose of the agents and how one side can accuse the other of the same offence. There remain, of course, insoluble questions as with all things human and philosophical. Leaders make mistakes and worse. Voters make the wrong choices. The search goes on for the ideal state.

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