
Book Reviews

Feng Tian-yu and Xie Gui-an (2003) *Destructing Despotism: Research on Neo-people-oriented Thought in Late Ming & Early Qing Dynasty*, Hubei, P.R.China: Hubei Publishing House, ISBN 7-216-03727-8 / D.

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Is Chinese neo-people-oriented thought a completely endogenous phenomenon or is it an outcome of eastern-western cultural exchange? This is a vexed problem that has been puzzling Chinese academia for a long period. Some scholars argue that all through its history China has never had any democratic tradition, since the required soil for the production of democracy in terms of political culture is absent. On the contrary, other scholars contend that old-line Chinese people-oriented thought is actually eastern or oriental democracy. *Destructing Despotism* refuses both these two views and reconsiders the neo-people-oriented thought that developed in the 17th Century – the late Ming and early Qing dynasty, providing insightful distinctions between neo-people-oriented thought and western democracy.

In this book, the authors examine the similarities and differences between traditional people-oriented thought and neo-people-oriented thought. The mainstream of ancient Chinese political ideas under despotism, traditional people-oriented thought advocates the notion which holds both the people and the emperor in high regard. Though somewhat at odds these two elements do complement one another. First of all, old people-oriented thought claims that the living and the development of the people is fundamental for the feudal empire and that the regnant class should attach importance to public opinion, and enrich the common people. However, as a critical instrument to primarily preserve the rights and government of a feudal empire, rather than to benefit the citizenry, this ideology ultimately aims at achieving stability and the continuance of the feudal empire.

Coming into being during the late Ming and early Qing dynasty, neo-people-oriented thought transcends its predecessor, approaching democracy in some respects. Unlike traditional people-oriented thought which simultaneously attributes great importance to the people and the emperor, the new idea system proposes to restrict the rights of the emperor so as to establish new emperor-minister, emperor-people and official-people relationships. However, the authors point out that this kind of power restriction, far from being beneficial to the common people, simply leads to the dispersion of decision-making power resulting in the expansion of the rights of the ministers and the discussion of state affairs within academia. However, it should be noted that the pillars of neo-people-oriented thought differ from western democracy as discussion about state affairs in academia is profoundly different from the parliamentary and electoral system. Confucians in the academy are not equal to citizens who live in democratic societies. Ultimately, by means of encouraging discussion about state affairs in academia, neo-people-oriented thought expects to extend the power of Confucians and implement the Confucians' political goal to become a master of the emperor.

The authors provide insightful comments on these two essentially different idea systems: Chinese neo-people-oriented thought and western democracy. Fundamentally, democracy advocates the idea that power resides in people. It assumes that people's fate should be decided by themselves and that a government should be organized from the people, by the people and for the people. Although Chinese neo-people-oriented thought embodies the spirit of a government from the people and for the people that could be traced back to traditional people-oriented thought, and could even be found in almost every dynasty, it does lack ideas and measures of the principle of a government by the people, which is absent from the whole of Chinese political history. This is the fundamental distinction between Chinese neo-people-oriented thought and western democracy. Therefore, the authors argue that the ideas and means of regal restriction in neo-people-oriented thought, which differs from those of constitutional monarchy, should be responsible for China's failure to become a democracy.

Consequently, the authors conclude that the equality of the emperor and the people in neo-people-oriented thought has epoch-making implications with regard to its significant theoretical contribution, which is to a certain extent similar to the idea of democracy, but, strictly speaking, remains different from the concept of western democratism. As a transitional conformation from the translation of people-oriented thought to modern democracy, neo-people-oriented thought goes to the verge, but can not cross the threshold of modern democratic consciousness. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, Chinese neo-people-oriented thought had become a bridge to western democracy and grafted some western democratic ideas on Chinese ancient political consciousness. For example, Father

Sun Zhong Shan (or Sun Yat-Sen) made use of democratic ingredients in neo-people-oriented thought to successfully introduce democratic ideology. During the 1919 May Fourth Movement period, people found that western democracy had been misunderstood and that neo-people-oriented thought only represented an obstacle to diffuse genuine democratic thought. Hence they turned directly to western democracy and modern science. To thoroughly introduce democratic ideology into China, transcending neo-people-oriented thought is necessary and inevitable.

As to the use of historical materials, the authors have excavated plenty of works that concentrate on the subject matter and have strenuously collected various scattered historical literature. In this monograph, readers will find sporadic notes, the words of sages and even a myriad of evidence coming from the novels of the Ming (1368-1644) & Qing (1644-1911) Dynasty's, which corroborate each other and make diverse historical data comprehensive and reliable. I think this book has much to offer to scholars and students in the field of politics and history.