

## *On the Liberatory Potential of the Past: The Case of Non-Feudal China\**

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*I argue in this essay that the past holds the potential for liberating us from modern categories and thus for helping us envision alternative political futures. More specifically, I show how China's non-feudal past offers resources for a future model of governance based on unity and social mobility.*

**Key words:** history; modernity; the past; feudalism; China; Bertrand Russell; orientalism

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell visited China in 1920-1921, traveling around the country and giving lectures. When he returned home, Russell wrote a book called *The Problem of China*, which was published in 1922. In it, he lays out his reflections about China in the early twentieth century, in the volatile Republican period after the end of dynastic rule in 1911 and well before the establishment of Communist rule under Mao Zedong in 1949.

As is common with books of this genre, *The Problem of China* is filled with anecdotal observations, not altogether lacking in truth but concealing multiple layers of complexity. Russell indulges in all too familiar tropes about the east. He writes, for example, that “instinctive happiness, or joy of life” characterizes China, whereas it has been lost in the west due to industrialism and the high pressures of life.<sup>1</sup>

The type of orientalism in the book is, as this example suggests, geared towards self-critique, holding up China as a model—although not an altogether idyllic one. What most worries Russell about the west is its pursuit of profit, which he attributes to capitalism. Writing between the two World Wars, Russell sees capitalism as leading nations around the globe into a Gadarene rush towards war.

Since it is impossible, as he puts it, “to make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, or peace and freedom out of capitalism,” the question is whether there are alternatives to the latter. At various points in the book, Russell recommends socialism, as he does (in much more detail) in other political writings. But it is not always clear whether he wants (his humanistic version of) socialism to be embraced by China, or by the west alone. For, on the one hand, he argues that socialism is the

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only solution to what he calls “the far eastern question.” On the other hand, he seems to mean that, embraced by Europe and America, socialism would temper the west’s belligerence and herald democratic international cooperation. Indeed, Russell is hesitant in recommending socialism to China, wary as he is of dismissing its traditional ways of life—the source of what he describes as the Chinese capacity for happiness. His reluctance to present socialism as a universal creed actually appears early on in the book, in an anecdote that he uses to set the stage for his voyage into China. In the first chapter, he relates a trip he took in Bolshevik Russia in the summer of 1920. He is on a boat on the Volga and it is dark. The boat moors in a desolate area, where Russell finds “a strange assemblage of human beings, half-nomads, wandering from some remote region of famine, each family huddled together surrounded by all its belongings, some sleeping, others silently making small fires of twigs.”

Then morning comes. Russell continues:

I resumed the interminable discussions of the materialistic conception of history and the merits of a truly popular government [...]. But something of that patient silence had communicated itself to me, something lonely and unspoken remained in my heart throughout all the comfortable familiar intellectual talk.

And here comes the crucial introspective moment; Russell writes:

at last I began to feel that all politics are inspired by a grinning devil, teaching the energetic and quick-witted to torture submissive populations for the profit of pocket or power or theory [...]. As we journeyed on, fed by food extracted from the peasants, protected by an army recruited from among their sons, I wondered what we had to give them in return. But I found no answer. From time to time I heard their sad songs or the haunting music of the balalaika; but the sounds mingled with the great silence of the steppes, and left me with a terrible questioning pain in which Occidental hopefulness grew pale.

It was in this mood that I set out for China to seek a new hope.

## 1 The Problem of *The Problem of China*

The question that I address in this essay concerns this hope: the hope for an alternative to the (socialist and liberal) west and its tribulations, to be provided by China. More specifically, I ask whether this hope can indeed abjure the kind of imposed universalism that Russell worries about in relation to socialism, without at the same time falling into a form of orientalism. For this hope, the hope expressed by Russell, to find in the east a solution to the west’s predicament, is still very much alive today. This is despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that we have witnessed, since the publication of Russell’s book, various world events that have transformed the relationship between the west and the east: the Second World War, the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin wall, the Asian financial crisis, the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, September 11, and the concerted effort to overhaul the portrait of the east in western scholarship.

Experts and amateurs alike continue to ask not only what the west can learn from the east but, more specifically, what the capitalist, industrialist, technology-driven, materialist, profit-seeking, competitive, unequal, and individualistic west can learn from the east. In answer to this question, Confucian China is presented as promising harmony in place of competition, community in place of

individualism, intuition in place of science, meaning in place of meaninglessness, lightness in place of burdened lives.

Though not entirely devoid of truth, this abstract duality is a tired one; we still operate within it because, to put it simply, we are stuck. Western scholars, acutely sensitive to the dangers of imperialism, are wary of imposing their values, whether freedom or justice or equality, on China, so they often end up falling back on this duality, just as Russell did a hundred years ago. Is there a way out of this impasse?

My contention is that there is indeed a way out. On the one hand, my contention is—Russell’s Volga-born wariness notwithstanding—that in the short term we have no option but to hold out the promise of our normative ideals—freedom and equality—as universal and thus universally applicable. On the other hand, I argue that it is possible to identify alternatives offered by China and other parts of the non-western world (and ones that are not simply spirituality, or peace, or community), namely by taking a long-term perspective. More specifically, what the *longue durée* perspective allows us to see is the potential that the past (rather than the present) holds for liberating us from modern descriptive and normative categories and therefore for helping us imagine alternative futures. I will thus endeavor to show in this essay that, in contrast with Europe’s feudal model, China’s past non-feudal model offers resources for a future model of governance particularly suited to unity and to social mobility.

Before I elaborate this long-term argument, which is my main focus in this essay, I will first sketch the argument for short-term universalism here, as it will help me set the stage for the argument regarding a historical, long-term approach. I will then turn to explaining the materialist, historical approach I adopt, before finally proceeding to the topic of feudalism and the normative consequences of China’s past, non-feudal model.

Briefly put, the short-term argument, i.e., the argument for espousing the universality of such values as freedom and equality, and thus their appropriateness for China, relies on an insight drawn from precisely that theory which Russell expresses disillusionment with on the second day of his trip on the Volga. The theory is Karl Marx’s “materialist conception of history.” Its insight is basically to view normative ideals as responsive to, or ideally suited for, a given material reality. To translate this insight into the topic at hand, the idea is as follows: normative ideals like equality and liberty are particularly suited to the material reality of the modern state. To the extent that the modern state as a political form has become more or less universal today<sup>2</sup>—aided in this respect by the forces of capitalism—then liberty and equality must be universal as well. They are the only tools available for tempering the excesses of the modern state.<sup>3</sup>

This argument does not necessitate dismissing all continuity between the past and the present. Indeed, scholars like Wang Hui have questioned the idea that China’s transition from empire to modern state was either complete or sharp.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, the question is not whether current states are entirely different from previous empires, but rather whether their nation-state characteristics are their defining ones, and thus have more explanatory force than their persistent imperial features. I argue that this is indeed the case: while the social order in post-1949 China has been much less uniform than the nation-state ideal suggests,<sup>5</sup> modern China partakes, I contend, of the essential features of the modern state: territorial sovereignty, centralization, and the functional differentiation between the government and other internal political bodies, with the former holding authority over the latter (El Amine 2016: 106). Whereas imperial power was unabashedly coercive, the modern Chinese government does heed the need to justify its authority, thereby partaking, even if merely symbolically, in the principle of the contractual relationship between ruler and ruled that defines nation-states (Spruyt 2013: 21-3).<sup>6</sup>

Once this argument about China is accepted, then the road is paved for the idea that normative ideals like liberty and equality are also relevant to the country today. The argument does not require taking on any determinism or teleology about history; it simply requires the premise that the applicability of normative ideals is constrained by material conditions. It should be no surprise, for example, that Confucian rituals are unlikely to bring about the happiness extolled by Russell in today's industrial, capitalist, sovereign, authoritarian, powerful China. Indeed, the problem with *The Problem of China* is that it takes China as it is today (or, more accurately, at the time of Russell's writing) and the west as it also stands, and then asks what the one can learn from the other. In other words, what is being asked is for the weaker party to offer alternatives to the stronger party about an existing world order that owes much more to the strong than to the weak. It is no wonder, then, that what the weak will be found to offer is kindness, harmony, love, and peace.

But what if we look at China not in an age where it has had to participate in a global order not of its own making, and to the west not in an age in which it is dominant? In other words, what if we turn to the past? I argue for the liberatory potential of the past in the section that follows.

## 2 The Liberatory Potential of the Past

Keen on releasing the east of the hold of western, usually liberal, categories, scholars have turned to ancient texts—in the case of China, primarily the Classical Confucian texts—to elicit non-western alternative modes of ethical action and political organization. The problem with some instances of this approach, however, is the tendency, in various proposals for “Confucian democracy” for example, to present ancient traditions as having a direct bearing on the present in a way that depends on overstating the continuity in China's past three thousand years.

Yet the past can be studied in a less essentialist manner, namely by focusing on social conditions and, when studying ancient texts, placing them in their relevant social context. This again can be broadly described as a Marxist approach—though not much rides on this description.<sup>7</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, who describes this approach as the “social history of political theory,” distinguishes it from the approach of the Cambridge School, for whom the “social context is itself intellectual, or at least the ‘social’ is defined by, and only by, existing vocabularies” (Wood 2011: 8).<sup>8</sup> She favors focusing instead on “major social and economic developments.” For example, for the Europe of the 1300s to 1600s—the period favored by the Cambridge School—these would include “agriculture, the aristocracy and peasantry, land distribution and tenure, the social division of labour, social protest and conflict, population, urbanization, trade, commerce, manufacture, and the burgher class” (Wood 2011: 9). The suggestion here is not that a “theorist's ideas can be predicted or ‘read off’ from his or her social position or class” (Wood 2011: 12); different ideas can spring up in the same social context. The point merely is to see these ideas as responding to specific social, political, and economic conditions.

Because the aim of the exercise is to complicate the continuity between different historical periods given the various social conditions that reign in them, it might seem as if looking at the material bases of past ideas only accentuates their foreignness and distance from us today. But the exercise is by no means an antiquarian one. As Wood argues, “it is in the context of history that theory emerges from the realm of pure abstraction and enters the world of human practice and social interaction” (Wood 2011: 14), thus allowing us to note the different possible recommendations that have been offered for different social, economic, and political configurations, even if ours do not, and will likely not, replicate those of the past. Second, as Wood also argues, this

historical approach “allows us to look at our own historical condition from a critical distance,” encouraging us to resist the temptation of taking “for granted the dominant ideas and assumptions of our own time and place” (Wood 2011: 16). Moving beyond current material realities thus makes it possible to transcend certain descriptive and normative categories: state, liberty, class, sovereign, citizen, etc.; in other words, it allows us to avoid the problem of *The Problem of China*. And then we can ask: What other categories of political organization, and political thought, have been possible in history, and what do they tell us about what might be possible in the future?

In what follows, I offer an example of this exercise, asking specifically about feudalism in the Chinese past. A vast literature exists on the topic of whether “feudalism” describes China; my treatment will necessarily be brief and mostly suggestive. My primary concern in this essay is in the question of what is at stake in making such claims about Chinese history, and non-western histories more generally, particularly normatively. The motivating question, more specifically, is the following: If liberty, constitutionalism, and rights developed out of feudalism, then what alternative normative ideals arise from alternative histories? I will make the case for unity and social mobility arising out of China’s alternative “fractal” model. To do so, I first need to establish the centrality of the feudal model to normative political theory in and about the west.

### 3 Feudalism in the Western Historical Narrative

Feudalism often operates as a point of contrast, whether implicitly or explicitly, to many cherished modern ideals. Thus it was out of a long history of feudalism that the modern European state developed, and with it, in more recent decades, the ideals of rights and popular sovereignty. Our modern understandings of class, the urban-rural divide, state-society relations, and the role of religion in public life draw to a large extent on our understanding of the European state’s feudal precursors and Europe’s historical trajectory out of feudalism. Kathleen Davis views feudalism as a concept created by us moderns, writing that feudalism “is one of our most graphic examples of Walter Benjamin’s insight that “modernity” simultaneously produced and destroyed the images of tradition to which it opposed itself” (Davis 2008: 7).<sup>9</sup>

While feudalism is, as Davis describes, used as a point of contrast with modernity, it is also presented as a necessary stage on the way to it. This is especially so for orthodox Marxists, for whom the evolution of history follows both a determinate and a teleological path; yet, seeing feudalism as a precursor to modernity is by no means restricted to the left. Feudalism features, if not as a necessary cause, then at least as central to the story, in the rise of constitutionalism/freedom/capitalism/modernity/the state system in such diverse works as Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), François Guizot’s *Histoire des Origines du Gouvernement Représentatif* (1851), Charles Tilly’s *Coercion, Capital, and European States* (1990), and Francis Fukuyama’s *The Origins of Political Order* (2011).

Feudalism is variously described, in these and other works, as a villain, associated as it is with serfdom, domination, and the rise of absolutism; yet given its key place in the history that leads to modern Europe, it is treated as a necessary villain. A case in point is Wood’s *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages* (2011)—cited above for the idea of a “social history” of political theory. After having set up her materialist approach to the history of political thought, against both traditional canonical histories and the approach adopted by the Cambridge School, Wood ends up exactly where those two almost always end up: praising the ingenuity of the western tradition.<sup>10</sup> She thus traces the invention of political theory to the Greeks

alone, claiming that in “other ancient civilizations”—and she cites China and India here—“the political order was not treated as an object of systematic critical speculation” (Wood 2011: 2).<sup>11</sup> More importantly for the purposes of this essay, she describes the west as being characterized by a “complex three-way relation between the state, propertied classes and producers” (Wood 2011: 22). Indeed, she attributes to this three-way relation, and the conflicts that emerged from it, more or less the invention of liberty in the west: the tension between the state and propertied classes “placed a special premium on their own autonomous powers, their rights against the state, and also on conceptions of liberty,” such that “challenges to authority could come from two directions: from resistance by subordinate classes to oppression by their overlords, and from the overlords themselves as they faced intrusions by the state” (Wood 2011: 25). She concludes that “this helped to keep alive the habit of interrogating the most basic principles of authority, legitimacy and the obligation to obey, even at moments when social and political hierarchies were at their most rigid” (Wood 2011: 25).

This argument is typical of claims made about feudalism, though advanced on a far longer time scale. While diverse, this family of arguments about feudalism coalesces around the idea that it is from feudalism that liberty arises—albeit indirectly and often by way of an absolutist interlude.<sup>12</sup> Feudalism somehow sets the stage for—or, on Wood’s account, maintains underground—the “habit” of interrogating authority.<sup>13</sup>

Wood writes of China that “throughout its long imperial history ... large property and great wealth were associated with office, and the imperial state did everything possible—if not always successfully—to maintain that connection and to impede the autonomous development of powerful propertied classes” (Wood 2011: 18). The suggestion here is that this trend explains why China never developed the same “habit” of interrogation—liberty—that Europe developed. It is possible to respond to this claim by challenging Wood’s understanding of Chinese history, showing how in fact political and economic power did not always converge. But this strategy would rest on an approach in which “the rest of the world has to be fitted into a template provided by Europe, and reduced to its well-known patterns” (Bang 2015: 60).<sup>14</sup> I sketch out in what follows another approach that, instead of finding mistakes in Wood’s account, uses her historical methodology to draw very different conclusions about China.

#### 4 The Case of Non-Feudal China

The fascination with feudalism in western history has engendered a concomitant interest in finding feudalism in non-European settings.<sup>15</sup> The latter interest does not merely stem from the need to prove Marx’s theory of universal history right, but also from a concern with proving the east capable of modernity (since, in the various accounts, feudalism is central in one way or another to its achievement). Be that as it may, in the case of China, it was the twentieth century Marxist movement that brought about the proliferation of inquiries about feudalism in the Chinese past. More specifically, an equivalence was introduced between the Chinese term *fengjian* and the European idea of feudalism. As Viren Murthy writes, “This concept of *fengjian* as mode of production and as Other of modernity became institutionalized after 1949 and hence schoolchildren around China still read about how May Fourth intellectuals and the Communist Party struggled to bring China out of *fengjian*” (Murthy 2008: 176).<sup>16</sup>

Arif Dirlik argues that “Chinese history had indeed informed the Chinese understanding of feudalism, but this is more a consequence of the attempt to fit the concept to Chinese history than

of the hold on historical thinking of a native concept” (Dirlik 1985: 199).<sup>17</sup> Is there, then, a benefit in freeing China from the feudalism narrative? If China did not experience European-style feudalism, how was political order maintained at various stages of its pre-modern history, and what implications does an alternative political trajectory have for thinking about our post-feudal world?

Adopting the approach Wood recommends and calls “the social history of political theory,” I discuss in what follows two historical periods in China that are usually associated with feudalism, namely the Western Zhou dynasty (1050-772 BCE) and late imperial China (14<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries). I posit that what is distinctive about these two moments is the way in which local forms of government are continuous with, and even replicate to a large extent, the form of government adopted by the central authority.

This is of course a broad generalization of the two periods of concern here, not to mention of the whole of Chinese history, especially given periods of noted centralized control (during, for example, the Qin Dynasty) or widespread fragmentation (during, for example, the Six Dynasties). My account is, moreover, not only derivative from the secondary literature but also only picks one (prominent) work from this literature for each period, thus shying away from the relevant scholarly controversies. Ultimately, I mean the exercise below in charting China’s alternative history to be a primarily heuristic one, my main purpose being to ask how history can be used to draw out normative lessons. The question I will be setting the stage for is again the following: If conflict was crucial to freedom, then is a political order that is more consensual destined to be inimical to freedom? “No” will be my answer. Instead of presenting this social history of China as the negative Other of the western story, as Wood does, I will go beyond the comparative question by asking about the future, rather than about the present: I will not ask whether China’s past was better or worse than that of the west, or whether it yielded a better or worse state of affairs; I will rather ask what ideas can be elicited from the distinctive Chinese social and political conditions to help us imagine a future that is not beholden to our modern categories and values.

### *The Western Zhou Dynasty*

The Zhou Dynasty was the longest-lived dynasty in Chinese history, but its glory is concentrated in the first half of its tenure, known as the Western Zhou (1045-770 BCE). As Edward Shaughnessy writes, “Throughout China’s long history, the Western Zhou has served as its guiding paradigm for governmental, intellectual, and social developments” (Shaughnessy 1999: 292).<sup>18</sup> The territory it encompassed stretched around the Yellow River, in the northeastern part of modern China. It is known as the “Western” Zhou because its capital was located closer to its western border than to its center.

Li Feng argues that, on the administrative level, in contrast to the preceding Shang Dynasty, which was an “aggregation of self-governing communities” (Li 2006: 2),<sup>19</sup> the Zhou extended the reach of the central government, especially over the vast terrain to the east of the capital, by appointing princes of the royal family as local rulers. He contends that these local rulers were “bound to the Zhou royal court through a unified ancestral cult and by their need of royal support to survive in the new environment” (Li 2006: 2).

Li contends that this system should not be described as feudal. His argument crucially relies on a specific definition of feudalism (one that is naturally not uncontroversial). For Li, a feudal Zhou state would have been made up of “a cluster of proto-independent political entities loosely bound together by contractual obligations” and a feudal Zhou king would have had “little power beyond the small area of his own domain” (Li 2003: 116).<sup>20</sup> Li denies that this description fits the case of the

Western Zhou. On his account, the local Zhou states were in some ways more independent and in others less independent than European fiefs.

First, while the European feudal relationship between lord and vassal was a “personal” relationship involving “a ritual of homage and an oath of fealty,” the Western Zhou ceremony in which the king appointed regional rulers was “highly routine and bureaucratic, involving the performance of a number of officials” (Li 2003: 120-1). The feudal relationship was also contractual, demanding mutual obligations (Li 2003: 122), whereas the relationship between king and regional ruler in the Western Zhou placed no “new responsibility on the king” (Li 2003: 123). Western Zhou central political authority was maintained through the “Lineage Law,” which ensured the submission of “minor lines” to the “primary lines” of royal descent, through the royal court’s installment of the office of “Overseers of the States” (*jian guo* 監國) in the regional states, and through the visits to the royal court that regional rulers were mandated to perform upon assuming office (Li 2006: 112-4).

The second difference concerns land jurisdiction and property. Li explains that the Zhou regional states were established as part of a strategy initiated by the Duke of Zhou to control rebelling territories in the east and to protect against foreign invasion (Li 2006: 125). The thus-formed states “enjoyed the full rights of government over the subjects of their territories,” including “the implementation of legal punishment,” hence performing “the same functions as did the Zhou central government, but on a much smaller scale” (Li 2006: 127). By contrast, the medieval fief “was essentially a ‘stipend’ to maintain the vassal’s capability to serve his lord” and “it was not a property with full rights, but was held from the lord and carried only rights specifically defined by the vassal’s contract with the lord” (Li 2006: 128).

The third and final relevant comparison for my aims here concerns the army and military organization. Li argues that while the medieval western army “was a loosely bound body of soldiers who, though professional warriors by nature, served the lords and kings only for fixed terms and on a conditional basis,” its Western Zhou counterpart “was composed of soldiers who stood always for the king in a system that was routinely managed and financed by the king” (Li 2006: 139).

Li prefers the use of the term *fengjian*, mentioned above (and first used in the *Zuo zhuan*) instead of feudalism: *feng* describes “the action of planting trees to demarcate borders between two states” and *jian* means “to establish” (Li 2006: 143). He clarifies that “the ‘*fengjian*’ institution was created when the Zhou central power was strong enough to impose far-reaching order in North China, in contrast to the feudo-vassalistic institution, which emerged when the Frankish Empire was weakening” (Li 2006: 144).

The difficulty with Li’s account lies in the tension between central control and autonomous local structures; other scholars see less central control and reach than Li does in the Western Zhou.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the Western Zhou ultimately gave way to a period of conflict between the various regional states, culminating in the aptly named “Warring States” period (475-221 BCE). Be that as it may, what is noteworthy in his account for my purposes, especially as will be echoed in the account of the late imperial period below, is the way in which local government accords with, and replicates, central government. While this overarching structure based on unity and resemblance ultimately fell apart, suggesting more weakness than the preceding account allows for (especially with increasing threats from non-Zhou states), its ultimate demise does not nullify its distinctiveness from the feudal model, in which conflict was the principle, not the exception. This distinctiveness is akin to what Bin Wong describes as the “fractal quality” of the late imperial period, to which I now turn.<sup>22</sup>



*Late Imperial China*

In *China Transformed*, R. Bin Wong compares the processes of state formation in China and Europe. The familiar European chronology involves passage from empire, to divided and overlapping sovereignty, to consolidation and the formation of larger states (Wong 1997: 101).<sup>23</sup> As mentioned above, this development relied on a few distinctive historical trends, variously related to feudalism: the conflict between state and Church, the tension between central power and aristocratic gentry, the rise in importance of cities and urban elites, the accentuated class divisions, especially in urban areas, the growing mercantilist logic of accumulation, and the increasing competition to expand and colonize territories far afield to extract more resources.

What we see in China, in contradistinction with Europe, is, according to Wong, a more continuous relationship between government officials and local elites. This means that China did not witness a similar assertion of the “power and autonomy of nobles, burghers, and clerics” as in Europe (Wong 1997: 92). Estates, as well as classes more generally, were thus less important than in Europe; the units of social order were instead “families, lineages, and villages” (Wong 1997: 107). Lineages took on corporate form, complementing state strategies by providing moral, coercive, and some material benefits to their members (Wong 1997: 100). Add to this the household registration system based on mutual responsibility between neighboring households, which were often kin. Also central to the contrast with Europe is the relatively greater importance of “rural social order” than its urban counterpart. China was, after all, an agrarian empire (Wong 1997: 111). What Chinese rulers feared the most, according to Wong, were peasant rebellions, especially in the border areas, rather than usurpation by the aristocracy and urban elites (Wong 1997: 108).

As mentioned earlier, Wong emphasizes what he describes as the “fractal quality” of late imperial Chinese governance. The idea is that “the logic of constructing social order based on [social institutions like granaries] was the same whether articulated locally or by the emperor” (Wong 1997: 121). Presumably, this continuity is not unrelated to the importance of villages and lineages, and accounts for the fact that the emperor and local gentry shared a “Confucian agenda” (Wong 1997: 121)—yet this still leaves the question open of why the Chinese gentry found it to be in their interest to ally with and share the direction of the emperor, rather than compete with the latter.

This confluence of goals between local gentry and emperor was thus a mainstay of Chinese governance despite, according to Wong, movement between, and continual debates about, *fengjian* versus *junxian* (prefectural) ideals of local order (Wong 1997: 121)—the first associated, as mentioned in the previous section, with the Zhou dynasty, and the second with the Qin dynasty, the dynasty that re-unified China after the complete collapse of the Zhou and ruled on the basis of a more centralized system. Indeed, in his study of the intellectual debates of the medieval period (i.e., the period preceding the one that Wong’s book is focused on), Ignacio Villagran shows how scholars mobilized even the *fengjian* system, which is based on local autonomy, for the cause of unity (Villagran 2015: 15).<sup>24</sup> He thus proposes to “undo the correspondence between ‘unity’ as a political ideal and ‘bureaucratic centralization’ as the administrative form of such unity” (Villagran 2015: 15). The point here is again to underscore how unity, rather than conflict, was central to Chinese imperial governance in its various forms—at least relatively speaking (i.e., in comparison with the western model), and without ignoring the great institutional differences between the *fengjian* and *junxian* systems. More specifically, the point of this section has been to suggest that this unity in the late imperial period, as in the ancient period, consisted of a combination of central control and local autonomy, with local modes of government replicating those at the center.

## 5 The Virtues of a Non-Feudal Past

If it is true that feudalism in Europe was a necessary step towards the achievement of liberty, rights, and constitutionalism, and that the conflictual relation between ruler and local gentry provoked the flourishing of these ideals in the modern period, what of societies whose historical trajectories did not witness such relations? More precisely, what of a China characterized by unity, not conflict, a meeting of interests between ruler and notables, and the fractal replication of modes of social order on the local level?

In this section, I suggest that two aspects recommend China's confluence-of-interests model: first, its suitability for a large territory, and second, its openness to social mobility. Indeed, as Wood's "social history of political theory" would predict, both a concern with unity and a concern with merit have been central to Chinese political thought since the ancient period, thus confirming the tight relationship between material conditions and political ideals. On the other hand, there is no suggestion here that China in practice lived up to these ideals. It did not—just like various European countries variously fell short of the ideals, like freedom, constitutionalism, and rights, commonly attributed to Europe.<sup>25</sup>

First, I pointed above to the relationship between the continuous quality of Chinese governance and the achievement of territorial unity. Unity over such a long period of time is especially noteworthy in the Chinese case given the size of the territory in question. As Yuri Pines argues, "its repeated insurrection in a more or less similar territorial framework and with a mode of functioning similar to that of the preceding unified dynasty clearly distinguishes China from other continental empires (Pines 2012: 11).<sup>26</sup> One should not exaggerate the similarities between the various Chinese dynasties here: from the earliest period, dynasties varied in the extent to which they established unity, and the form they gave to it, while intellectuals gave different justifications for unity depending on the context at hand.<sup>27</sup> But what is important for my purposes is the contrast with the European story, which, crucially, relies on fragmentation: the emergence of constitutionalism, rights, and freedom unfolds together with the fragmentation of the European continent into separate nation-states. Borders and the concomitant delimitation of insiders and outsiders are, in other words, the flip side of the liberty-and-equality coin. In the Chinese case, on the other hand, the achievement of a unified empire suggests the possibility of modes of political organization that do not require the constant delimitation of borders and thus the constant sorting out of who counts as in, and who counts as out.

Indeed, Bin Wong argues that domestic order in late imperial China extended "along a continuum that recognized zones more than borders and considered these to be culturally constructed as much as geographically defined" (Wong 1997: 103). These zones were not necessarily pitted one against the other; rather, the logic of political economy encouraged domestic exchange. The concern was to incorporate territories on the frontiers; therefore, investing in peripheries to further their integration, rather than extracting from them, was the more common policy (Wong 1997: 148). Contrast this with the logic of extraction that defined many of the European colonial adventures.

This is not to say that China did not exercise domination over neighboring territories in East Asia. The East Asian world operated on the basis of tribute relations (Wong 1997: 89), with China at the center. Some have argued that tribute relations, in contradistinction with colonial relations, left a larger margin of freedom for those subject to them, and were based on reciprocity, despite their hierarchical nature. For example, Wang Hui draws conclusions from the tributary system to reflect on the current status of Tibet, arguing against what he describes as a western, orientalist view that

favors Tibetan independence.<sup>28</sup> The worry about such a position is that it easily slides into an apology for the Chinese government, past and present. My own suggestion is not that tribute relations are good and should be brought back to the international stage, but simply that they open the way for envisioning forms of international relations that are not based on conflict and domination and the logic of state sovereignty that undergirds these.

The second aspect of the Chinese model that emerges from the account above is the peripheral importance of class distinctions. Recall how important class distinctions were for Wood's (Marxist) account of the western experience, indeed for any account that places feudalism front and center. But recall also how all of the nasty aspects of class—precisely the motivation behind the whole of Marx's project—end up taking second stage in these accounts in relation to the teleological story in which the tension between government, propertied classes, and the poor leads to freedom (even if it is only bourgeois freedom). What if one shifts the focus from the teleological virtues of class conflict back to the ills of class conflict? Doing so immediately casts the Chinese case in a more favorable light, as not being centrally governed by class domination and the concentration of property in a few hands. For, as Wong's account above shows, classes were less important than lineages and villages; social order was maintained through local governments that encompassed these lineages and villages. The villages were, in turn, based on neighborhood structures favoring mutual responsibility. One should also add to this organizational scheme the famous Chinese civil examination system, which allowed for candidates to be appointed to office, including in local governments, on the basis of merit—at least in principle (Hulsewé 1978: 541),<sup>29</sup> and which was continuous with the universal concern with merit and/or virtue among Chinese thinkers since Confucius. Based on the preceding, the Chinese case appears to eschew class struggle and class exploitation, and to allow for the possibility of social mobility—at least more than the western aristocracy-centered model of social order does.<sup>30</sup>

The Chinese model is often accused of favoring stability over change, and sameness over creativity. Perhaps this is true, but it should also then be pointed out, in the same gesture, that the model does not involve the acute class dynamics of propertied-propertyless, lord-serf, and free-slave. If a notion of equality is to be identified in this model, it is a notion highly mediated by an idea of merit. And if a notion of freedom is to be identified with it, it is a freedom *to* operate within this socially defined system and not a freedom *from* it; it is a freedom that lies in the interstices of this ideally harmonious and fluid whole, rather than one that is set over and against it in the form of acts of individual enfranchisement (Jullien 2003: 258).<sup>31</sup>

## 6 Past, Present, and Future

Even if the forgoing is true, one might still ask whether this matters—that is, whether the fact that the Chinese past carried these two distinctive possibilities matters if they did not bear fruit in contemporary China, in the way that the European past is said to have borne fruit in Europe's present.<sup>32</sup> But the important question here is not (only) whether China's past made for a good present, or even whether it should be used as inspiration for fixing present problems (whether in China or in Europe). Indeed, my emphasis in this essay on material realities is meant precisely to warn against the application of past lessons to current, very different, material contexts. The important question is where to go from here.<sup>33</sup> As such, my interest in this essay is not in the present, but in the future and in a more productive use of the past, namely to find in it, as Wang Hui argues, “sprouts or elements of a type of post-nation-state political form” (Wang 2011: 29). The

suggestion here is that its appropriateness for extended territory, as opposed to territorial fragmentation, and its propensity towards social mobility makes China's past fractal/harmonious model a good source of inspiration for thinking about such a post-nation-state political form.

Such a form need not, and should not, replicate exactly what has come before, for the world—and we—have changed. But the all-too-brief foray into feudalism I have provided in this essay—particularly the conflictual relations that were central to it—is meant to suggest that many phenomena and ideas we take for granted today are not set in stone. These include sovereign borders, clearly delimited territories, the modern class structure, and the organization of society around property. If these are not set in stone, then the normative ideas developed to regulate human life under them, namely liberty, rights, and constitutionalism, need not be either.

The problems of China today, which include authoritarianism, rapid industrialization, severe inequality, and environmental degradation,<sup>34</sup> are not distinctive to it: they are shared to varying degrees, and in various forms, around the world, spanning east and west. Modernization efforts had already brought social, economic, and cultural change to China around the time of Russell's visit; one hundred years later, China has been completely transformed, the traces of its past fleeting and elusive. But if modernity has made our present world more or less homogenous, it cannot erase the diversity and richness of the past. And it is precisely these pasts, and precisely the way in which they reveal possibilities that appear to us incongruous today, that can be liberatory for the future. As Dirlik puts it (in relation to the Marxist conceptualization of history), we “must start with the demystification of a consciousness which limits the possibility of diversity in the past in order to rationalize its denial to the present of imagining alternative possibilities for the future” (Dirlik 1985: 224).

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- <sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of China*, 1922 (<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13940>; last accessed on April 11, 2019).
  - <sup>2</sup> Even so-called “failed states” fulfill one of the central tenets that define the modern state, namely being recognized as sovereign by other states in the international arena.
  - <sup>3</sup> I have presented a (much more elaborate) version of this argument in Loubna El Amine, “Beyond East and West: Reorienting Political Theory through the Prism of Modernity,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no 1, (2016): 102–20.
  - <sup>4</sup> Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
  - <sup>5</sup> Vivienne Shue, “Party-State, Nation, Empire: Rethinking the Grammar of Chinese Governance,” *Journal of Chinese Governance* 3, no 3, (2018): 268–291.
  - <sup>6</sup> Hendrik Spruyt, “Empires, Past and Present: The Relevance of Empire as an Analytic Concept,” in ed. Noel Parker, *Empire and International Order* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd: 2013), 19–40.
  - <sup>7</sup> What a Marxist, materialist approach involves is itself a subject of contention, as the debate between Vivek Chibber and scholars of subaltern studies, including Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty, reveals. See ed. Rosie Warren Rosie, *The Debate on Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso Books, 2016).

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- 8 Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages* (London: Verso Books, 2011).
- 9 Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
- 10 “Social history” could be used here to help explain why all three schools of thought end up taking the same position when assessing the western tradition as a whole, but this is not germane to my aims in this essay.
- 11 I hope to have shown that she is wrong about China in my book, in which I present the early Confucian conception of political order. See: Loubna El Amine, *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 12 Perry Anderson, another Marxist scholar, also ironically offers an argument emphasizing the continuity and specialness of western history, made possible by the “concatenation of antiquity and feudalism” (*Lineages of the Absolutist States*. London: NLB, 1974, 420—emphasis original) which allowed for a distinctively “analytic and secular culture” (427), “ecclesiastical independence and estates-representation” (427), and finally “the general rights of private property” (429—emphasis original).
- 13 For an argument complicating the conventional understanding of the relationship between feudalism and liberty, see Deborah Boucoyannis, *From Roving to Stationary Judges: Power, Land, and the Origins of Representative Institutions* (forthcoming).
- 14 Peter Fibiger Bang, “Platonism: Ernest Gellner, Greco-Roman Society and the Comparative Study of the Pre-Modern World,” *Thesis Eleven* 128, no. 1, (2015): 56–71.
- 15 The debate about “Asiatic modes of production” can be mentioned here, if only as a reminder that it is not only China that is relevant as a case study to think about (the absence of) feudalism. Alternative non-feudal histories can be found in many (perhaps even most) places around the world outside Europe—indeed, even in America: thus Hannah Arendt, drawing on Alexis de Tocqueville, emphasizes the importance of the fact that the American Revolution did not arise, like its French counterpart did, “in a country which was still feudal in social and political organization” (Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, London: Penguin Books, 1990, 148). This importance resides, among other reasons, in that “Whatever constituted bodies there may have existed in Europe prior to the revolutions—estates, parliaments, privileged orders of all kinds—were indeed part and parcel of the old order and were swept aside by the Revolution; whereas in America, on the contrary, it was the old constituted bodies of the colonial period [the townships] which were, so to speak, liberated by the revolution” (Arendt 1990: 311, note 2). I thank Waseem Yaqoob for pointing me to these passages in Arendt.
- 16 Viren Murthy, “The Politics of Fengjian in Late Qing and Early Republican China,” in ed. Kai Wing Chow et al., *Beyond the May Fourth Paradigm: In Search of Chinese Modernity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008), 151–82.
- 17 Arif Dirlik, “The Universalization of a Concept: ‘feudalism’ to ‘Feudalism’ in Chinese Marxist Historiography,” in ed. T.J. Byres and Harbans Mukhia, *Feudalism and non-European Societies* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), 197–227.
- 18 Edward Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History” in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 292–351.
- 19 Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 20 Li Feng, “‘Feudalism’ and Western Zhou China: A Criticism,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 63, no. 1, (2003): 115–44.

- 21 I thank Jun-Hyeok Kwak, Michael Nylan, and an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.
- 22 The similarities between the two periods discussed here are very general and only meant to be suggestive. The time span that separates the two should in itself warn against the idea of drawing a direct line connecting them. Moreover, as Michael Nylan argues, properly so-called “unified rule” was brought about by the Qin Dynasty, and thus came after the fall of the Zhou; it “was ‘unmistakably new,’ even if itinerant advisers [of the Zhou] were busily inventing a host of hallowed precedents for it” (Nylan 2007: 53). Michael Nylan, “‘Empire’ in the Classical Era in China, 304 BC–AD 316,” *Oriens Extremus* 46, (2007): 48–83.
- 23 R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- 24 Ignacio Villagran, “In Search of the Ethical Empire: Medieval Chinese Debates on Fengjian and Junxian,” PhD thesis, University of Michigan (<https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/113389>; April 30, 2018).
- 25 As such, my argument departs from arguments like Daniel Bell’s in *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), which makes a case for social mobility like the one I offer below but actually attributes such mobility to the current workings of the Chinese system.
- 26 Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012). My approach in this essay parts ways, however, with Pines’ seeking of an explanation for this phenomenon in “the realm of ideology” (Pines 2012: 11).
- 27 See Nylan (2007).
- 28 Wang Hui, *The Politics of Imagining Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- 29 But also, to various degrees at various points in history, on the basis of birth or wealth: at its initial inception during the Han period, entry into the civil service was “through recommendation, through examinations, and by title of birth” (A. F. P. Hulsewé, “Ch’in and Han Law.” In *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 1, The Ch’in and Han Empires, 221 BC-AD 220*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1978], 520-44). Hulsewé adds that an original requirement was actually financial status, potentially because it would “protect incumbents from the dangers of bribery and corruption.” He also mentions the right to appoint descendants in government posts, a practice which “continued to exist despite being repeatedly abolished” (Hulsewé 1978: 541). Benjamin Elman writes that civil service examinations were formalized “in the six century by the Sui dynasty (581-618) and reinstituted under the Tang” but that “it was not until Empress Wu (r. 690-705) that rulers in China discovered that officials selected by open examinations served as useful countervailing force to the power of entrenched aristocrats in capital politics” (Benjamin A. Elman, “Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 1, [1991]: 7–28, 9). Elman cautions, however, against exaggerating the degree of social mobility that these examinations allowed, restricted as it continued to be to the segment of people “who had the cultural and linguistic resources to prepare their sons for the rigors of an examination cycle based on total memorization of ancient texts in archaic classical Chinese” (Elman 1991: 18).
- 30 It will be objected here that there is no such thing as “the western model” and that the western experience of feudalism and (by implication) capitalism is not homogenous. Indeed, this is precisely the crux of Eileen Wood’s own *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States* (London: Verso, 1991). But in the same way that she engages in generalizations about

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western history and thought in *Citizens to Lords*, even if these inevitably mask complexities, I employ similar generalizations as a heuristic device. Indeed, it is telling that the worry about generalizations about the west seems to be voiced more commonly and loudly whenever a negative comparison with the rest of the world is at stake (whereas a focus on the ingenuity of the west—a mainstay of academic scholarship for decades—does not appear to trigger this worry as often).

<sup>31</sup> François Jullien, *La Propension des choses* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Indeed, one often gets the impression, in Wood's and other accounts, that it is the virtues of the European present that are read back into its past (concomitantly with less focus on the vices of this present) rather than the other way round. See Bang (2015: 60) for an argument for "a new macro-historical narrative which is both careful not to read any kind of western 'superiority' too far back into history or make it a general phenomenon and to remain sensitive to dynamics in non-western societies."

<sup>33</sup> As Greg Anderson writes, "a modern academic discipline that takes seriously the ontological heterogeneities of human experience [...] might [...] help us to imagine less exploitative, more equitable, more sustainable lifeworlds of the future" (Greg Anderson, "Retrieving the Lost Worlds of the Past: The Case for an Ontological Turn," *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 3, [2015]: 787–810, 810).

<sup>34</sup> See Michael Nylan's essay in this volume.