

Vlad Mureşan

Ph.D. Associate Professor, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

The Chinese Idea

A Political-Theological Investigation

Abstract

The scope of the present article is to determine in a concentrate manner „the Chinese Idea”, which can reasonably be said to have characterized the ideal-type of Chinese political theology across centuries. Of course any such attempt is immediately indicted as fatally reductive. But then again denying any such attempt runs the risk of claiming there is nothing enduring, specific and irreducible characterizing what Eric Voegelin called the „*Chinese Ecumena*”. As such we are going to evoke some dominant schools of thought to make the case that, indeed, setting aside different contexts they do attest to the consequent reenactment and unfolding of one major Chinese idea we could call the idea of a “cosmological state”.

Preliminary note

China confronts us with an “obscure” problem. And it seems virtually impossible to approach this mystery unaffected by our Western mindset. But one feature of this Western mind is to precisely try to approach China *as-it-is-in-itself* (outside our categories - as much as this is possible). Otherwise said we try to understand China as if (*als ob*) we were not so fundamentally different. In order to understand the “idea” behind a civilization, we have no other access than to reduce its fully developed form to its very inception. Different epochs or variations of the same identity are the only way to seize the mysterious idea in the pure element of its self-production. It

is with this hypothesis that we strive to synthetically capture what we presume to be the *Chinese idea*.

1. The Emergence of the Chinese State as a Cosmological State

Perhaps the oldest founding figure in Chinese history is Yu the Great, reputed to have got to power by solving the crucial problem ancient sedentary civilizations faced: the ambivalence of water. Water was necessary and dangerous alike. Agriculture needs close water, but floods are unavoidable. So it is with Yu the Great that a solution first emerged. He devised not only a dam, but also a system of channels. A flood can break the dams, but with a channel system not only is excess water deviated but the destructive energy of the flood is converted into the positive energy of irrigation. With this civilizational achievement we can argue that the original Chinese state is grounded and legitimized as a “*cosmological state*”, that is – a state entrusted with the mandate of taming nature. The cosmogonic theme can already be discerned in the historicized tradition of Yu the Great. In more mythological accounts however, Yu the Great is transfigured as archetypal civilizing hero, confronting the primordial flood, killing monstrous creatures and – with the assistance of a Dragon - demiurgically forming the world – that is the *natural* and *political* worlds as well. Under the (mythical) Emperor Yao, "the world was not yet in order, the vast waters flowed in a disorderly way, they flooded the world." Unlike his father, who, to conquer the waters, had built dikes, Yu "dug into the ground and made [the waters] flow toward the seas; he hunted snakes and dragons and drove them into the swamps." All these motifs – the earth covered with water, the multiplication of snakes and dragons – have a cosmogonic structure. Yu plays the parts of demiurge and civilizing hero. For Chinese scholars, the organizing of the world and the founding of human institutions are equivalent to the cosmogony. The world is "created" when, by banishing the forces of evil to the four quarters, the sovereign sets himself up in a Center and completes the organization of society". (Mircea Eliade, 1978, p.15)

Whether historical or mythological it is clear that the primordial Chinese political theology somehow assimilated *the natural ordering of the world as political and the political ordering of the world as natural*.

2. The Political Theology of the *Shang* (1600 to 1046 BC)

This cosmological significance of the State is further elaborated in the political theology of the *Shang* dynasty. The sovereign is assigned a divine power to secure the cosmic and political order of the world. He is not just the political head of the state, but also the great priest in his capacity of the Son of the Heaven itself. Every family venerates the magic power of its ancestors. But the exceptional status of the sovereign is that his own ancestry goes as far as the heavenly origin of the world. The Heaven is his very first ancestor. This sacralization of power amounts to entrusting of cosmological powers to the sovereign. The order of cosmos and the order of the state are both harmonically dependent of the sovereign correct performing of rites, of the correct intercession on his part.

3. The “Heavenly Mandate” Doctrine of the *Zhou* (1046 to 221 BC)

The cosmic destination of the State is further reinforced with the advent of the *Zhou* dynasty. Conceived as a critical counterbalance to the *Shang* cosmic legitimization, it accepts the basic premise of the *Shang* political theology, while arguing that the cosmological legitimization of the Sovereign is not unconditioned but comes with responsibilities.

“The theologians of the *Zhou* époque have invented the theory of the divine mandate (*Tian ming*) and the type of the ideal sovereign whose model they saw in the figures of the emperors Yao, Shun and Yu, founding heroes of civilization (...). At the same time they attributed the last monarchs from recent dynasties the exact opposite characteristics: self-pride, lack of restraint and cruelty – denounced as causes of their own collapse. The sins of the reprobate prince estranges him from Heaven’s favors which no longer considers him as His “son” (the Son of Heaven remained the religious title of Chinese sovereigns) thereby withdrawing him the “mandate” (*Ming*) originally entrusted to the founder of the dynasty. The *Heavenly Mandate* is

therefore *precarious* and the Prince must exercise the good in order to preserve it." (Max Kaltenmark, 1980, p.12-13). The fundamental premise was that the moral order and the cosmic order are in ontological unity which makes the action of the Sovereign not only politically, but also cosmically decisive.

4. The Cosmo-genesis of the *Qin* Empire (221 to 206 BC)

The restoration of unity following the anarchical period can be seen as a new and more powerful expression of the same fundamental Chinese idea of the cosmological State. The dissolution of central authority and the ensuing anarchy did nothing but reinforce the notion that the political order and the cosmic order are fused together. The age of the warring states was generally perceived as a *universal cosmic dissolution*. This actually prompted the flourishing creativity of great philosophers in search of a radical solution. The grounding and of the imperial idea and the completion of the classical Chinese empire is the work of *Qin* (*Ch'in*) who accordingly assumes the *Shi Huang Di* title as Founding Emperor. The age of warring states is concluded with the emergence of a centralized military state. This crushes the nomadic tribes from the Nord and the rival feudal states unifying the Empire. By analyzing the defining decisions in the grounding of the autocratic Empire we have determined five profoundly symbolical gestures indicating the profound cosmological structure of the Chinese state ideology.

4. 1. The demarcation of the Empire in space

This is the age of the Great Wall's completion against barbarians from the North, as artificial border closing the natural borders. Building walls, not bridges the Empire strived to emerge as one unified world protected from the chaotic bursts of nomadic aliens. The cosmic centrality surrounded by chaotic peripheries renders once more the Chinese vision of the state cosmological in nature.

4. 2. The demarcation of the Empire in time

One decisive condition of the new achievement required a new beginning. The Emperor consequently burns the classical writings in an effort to completely annihilate the collective memory that characterized the political anarchy, as well as the cultural effervescence of the One Hundred Schools. We can read a demiurgical attempt in this radical gesture striving to the abolition of the old world and the recreation of an entirely new one. The creation of the Empire therefore amounts to a cosmological creation of a new time and a new space.

4. 3. The political concentration of power

The Emperor further builds a grandiose Palace in his capital that effectively reconstitutes and recapitulates all the palaces belonging to the local principalities he destroyed in the unification wars. He consequently commands all local aristocrats to live in this new gigantic Palace (a symptomatic centralistic gesture similar to what happened with the absolutist construction of Versailles). The center becomes therefore the recapitulative totalization of all provinces. The capital comes to (*materially*) symbolize the center of the world itself.

4. 4. The economical concentration of power

Another convergent measure was the expropriation of the land in the hands of the State. Private property was seen as an “abuse” and as merely division. This has led to the enduring repression of hereditary local aristocracies and to the genesis and the establishment of the imperial bureaucracy entrusted with the annual reallocation of the land. The *horizontal* feudal order was therefore practically abolished in favor of the *vertical* bureaucratic order. With virtually no exception, ulterior dynasties have repeatedly reenacted the effort to control local powers and to hinder any division of power through an ever renewed consolidation of the centralized bureaucracy.

4. 5. The cultural concentration of power

But a cosmological state requires more than political and economic concentration. The Emperor drastically limited freedom of speech as well. The corpus of *literati* had evolved into a distinct power threatening the homogeneity of the cosmological state. This prompted the instauration of an ideological and cultural autocracy. Since he couldn’t immediately eliminate negative reactions toward his work the Emperor resolved (among other measures) to effectively bury alive more

than four hundred “public intellectuals”. The new definition of the state required from now on *the self-reflection of power*. Intellectuals had no meaning except as forces in service of the cosmological state. Too much reflexive freedom for intellectuals was proper to the anarchy of the warring states. Intellectuals were accordingly incorporated into the cosmological architecture of the state as *mandarins*.

We need not further engage specific dynasties. Possibly derogatory examples can of course be found. But we believe that nothing revolutionary changes in the structure of the “cosmological” state ideology. We could mention for example the Han emperor Wu, mostly known for his restoration of the imperial cult of Earth (not only of the Heaven). This can at the first glance be seen as the restoration of a theological-political dualism since the cult of the earth was associated with the priesthood of the empress. In fact, as Marcel Granet explains “the emperor Wu, presented as the creator of the cult of Terra is one of the Chinese monarchs who best felt the dangers that the political dualism, supported by religious dualism represented for the State, by granting the Empresses too much prestige and the nobles’ widows too much authority. It is reasonable to admit that if he innovated by introducing sacrifices to Terra, the innovation actually consisted in the fact that the Emperor himself presided, personally and publicly, a sacrifice that the Empress should have presided (...). The most profitable interpretation of the sacrifice to the Earth is that it intended the Son of Heaven to benefit alone the religious prestige previously detained by queens and empresses” (Marcel Granet, 1988, p. 370)

5. The Chinese Idea

In order to synthesize we can conclude that the Empire emerged through a *violent palingenesis* just as a new cosmos emerges out of the primordial chaos. The cosmological state emerged by closing onto itself in *space* (through a fortified frontier), through a rebirth in *time* as absolute new beginning upon the ashes of the past, by recapitulating its provinces as parts, and by totalizing its land in its absolute center, the capital. It emerges as a unique collective consciousness absorbing the *literati* in service of the glorification of power. The grounding of the Empire is thus fundamentally a *cosmogonical act* of ordering the primordial chaos of anarchy.

It was our hypothesis that in order to understand the “idea” of a state it is crucial to understand its very formation which will preserve the original intention in the architecture of the whole. Setting aside historical variations, it is our contention that the original project or the “concept” itself survived as a perennial tendency or consistency of the entire “*Chinese Ecumene*” (Eric Voegelin).

“As for the structure and rhythms of the universe, there is perfect unity and continuity among the various fundamental conceptions from the time of the Shang to the revolution of 1911. The traditional image of the universe is that of the Center traversed by a vertical axis connecting zenith and nadir and framed by the four quarters. Heaven is round (it has the shape of an egg) and the Earth is square. The sphere of Heaven encloses the Earth. When the earth is represented as the square body of a chariot, a central pillar supports the dais, which is round like Heaven. Each of the five cosmological numbers – four quarters and one Center – has a color, a taste, a sound, and a particular symbol. China is situated at the center of the world, the capital is in the middle of the kingdom, and the royal palace is at the center of the capital”. (Mircea Eliade, 1978, p. 15-16)

We believe the present description does justice to this fundamental tendency since it resulted from the observation of the main original doctrines trying to conceive and legitimize the Chinese state itself. But we would like to corroborate our organization of the matter with some classical Western accounts on China. This metaphysical vision is of course reflected in political and economic consequences. Whether we focus on the *metaphysical interiority* or on the *political exteriority*, we must understand they both reflect the dominant Chinese political theology. Western authors have alternatively focused on religion, economy or politics, but these visions are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary since they reflect in a divided manner a greater totality.

Hegel insisted on the unity of the profane and the sacred in what he called “*Oriental theocracy*”. He keenly observed the mediatory and charismatic nature of his political power (before Weber) as well as the consequent state ownership of property (before Marx). The main feature was deemed to be the *patriarchal* nature of Chinese power, which meant that the emperor was crowned as “universal” *Father* of a nation of a very profound familial nature. This also meant a

moral notion of power, since power was only supposed to be “fatherly” (not *paternalistically*) exercised within the greater community.

“The Emperor, as he is the Supreme Head of the State, is also the Chief of its religion. Consequently, religion is in China essentially State-Religion. (...) On this depend harvest, the seasons of the year, the abundance and sterility of crops. The Emperor, as crown of all — the embodiment of power — alone approaches heaven; individuals, as such, enjoy no such privilege. He it is, who presents the offerings at the four feasts; gives thanks at the head of his court, for the harvest, and invokes blessings on the sowing of the seed” (G.W.F. Hegel, 2001, p. 149).

Marx transcribed Hegel’s idealistic approach of “Oriental theocracy” into his materialistic (and somehow caustic) theory of the “Asiatic mode of production” focusing on the nature of the property arrangement. The Asiatic mode of production characterizing China reflected the state property ownership. No Greek-like notion of citizenship, but “the private caprice of a single individual so that, as in Asian despotism, the political state was as much a slave state as the material state” (Karl Marx, 1975, p. 32). The state was the very center concentrating all land and providing it to people by the mediation of his giant functionary apparatus. This doctrine will further be elaborated by Karl Wittfogel with his notions of the “hydraulic empire” and “total power” (Karl Wittfogel, 1957)

Max Weber dubbed this system *prebendalism* as opposed to *feudalism*. This characterizes a system where state officials, functionaries, feel entitled to a part of the state’s benefices. This encourages the political rather than economical recruitment, as opposed to family property and economic independence from the state. This is a direct consequence (we believe) of state ownership of property where the imperial ideology holds local powers and individual liberties to essentially be (dangerous) usurpations of its own authority.

„The hereditary nature of the *fief* itself was not decisive as it came to be in the Occident but was rather considered a gross *abuse*” (Max Weber, 1951, p.35). „During feudal times, an *order of fiefs* corresponded to rank gradation by hereditary charisma. After the abolition of subinfeudation an *order of prebends* corresponded to the shift toward bureaucratic administration. The prebends were soon firmly classified under the *Ch’in*; the *Han* followed their example (...) This meant the complete abolition of *feudalism*” (Max Weber, 1951, p. 36).

A particularly important contribution to the Chinese political philosophy belongs to Eric Voegelin. He observes that, as opposed to other empires in the Ancient East, which were always aware that they there are multiple empires engaged into constant competition, China developed in a more isolated manner: “China was never one society among others; from its beginnings the history of Chinese society was for its members, to the best of their knowledge, the history of mankind” (Eric Voegelin, 2000 p. 353). This, we believe, has naturally reinforced the character of a “cosmological” “total” state as unity of mankind and the world, *tsien-hia* (the earth in his capacity of “carrier of mankind”, as Voegelin translates it).

If we would like to deeply understand by contrast the *Chinese idea*, perhaps no other idea is more alien to it than the *American idea*. The Extreme Orient appears therefore in its entire opposition to the Extreme Occident. The ideal-type of a self-reflected Sinocentric circularity (*Tian Xian*), fulfilling itself in the self-production of the center in and through the periphery, within the gravitational cohesion of the center holding together the total mass of the “world” into its orbit. While America emerges as *temporal* projective acceleration, as perpetual and disruptive progression towards the “new”, China arises majestically as the *spatial* finitude circularly closed upon itself, as the immobile *stasis* of the mass. It is as if America wills a future without past, while China wills a past without a future - two opposing manners to approach Eternity.

Conclusions

Not even China’s recent history fully escapes the pattern of a *cosmological state*. Mao’s reign was not only the full realization of communist centralism but it also echoed the Legalist tradition of the *Qin* dynasty which Mao proudly appropriated. Deng Xiaoping’s radical departure from Mao’s drive to total control is no objection to our idea. In effect Deng Xiaoping’s reforms only came at the climax of a disaster or solution of last resort to save the system. The liberalization he allowed was never intended to abolish the state’s hold over the whole. “Socialism the Chinese way” was mostly an attempt to unleash productive powers while maintaining the *integrity* of the state control over all strategic realms. Liberalization was encouraged as long as it could work for the restoration of the greatness of China. On the contrary, the current political philosophy of Xi

Jinping, aiming at a *Fuxing (Rejuvenation)*¹ actually signals a restoration of the millenary glory of the *Middle Kingdom*, of “the cosmological state” – only temporarily affected by the “aberration” of a disruptive and conflicting modernization.

In guise of a conclusion let us return from the present to the past, in order to contemplate once more their consistency:

The role of cosmology in the formation of China's early empires is a crucial question in Chinese history, one with great relevance to defining "*Chineseness*" today. This is because cosmology and the unified empire have been seen as the two most enduring structures of Chinese civilization. Two thousand years of official histories have repeatedly told the story of their eternal validity, transcending time and events, so that this unchanging order has become an unquestionable truth. Today, cosmology and a unified empire still serve as resources for forging China's national identity. Revived by some, cursed by others, traditional cosmology is used to represent a cultural identity that is authentically Chinese, and a unified empire continues to be held by most Chinese as the only justified form of government for China. By questioning the social production of these two enduring structures of Chinese civilization, this study seeks to demonstrate how, beneath their unitary and recurring patterns, cosmology as a realm of the cultural and empire as a realm of the political were formed by a common dialectical process of mutual production and transformation in early China. (Aihe Wang, 2000, p.1-2)

Bibliography

Eliade, Mircea (1978), *A History of Religious Ideas*, University of Chicago Press.

Hegel, G.W.F. (2001), *The Philosophy of History*, New York: Batoche Books.

Granet, Marcel (1988), *La civilisation chinoise*, Paris: Albin Michel.

¹ “Leaders have used national rejuvenation as a grand goal to mobilize the Chinese population to support the revolution or reforms they launched. In making these efforts, they have helped transform China into the modern and more powerful nation it is today. Far from weakening their resolve, however, China’s impressive new achievements have only strengthened its citizens’ commitment to achieving the *Chinese Dream*. It bears noting that the Chinese Dream is in many ways the polar opposite of the more widely understood American Dream. Specifically, whereas the American Dream emphasizes individuals attaining personal enrichment and success, the Chinese Dream is a collective undertaking that calls upon Chinese citizens to make personal sacrifices in order to serve the greater, national good. (*Not Rising, But Rejuvenating: The Chinese Dream*, Zheng Wang, *The Diplomat*, February 05, 2013).

- Kaltenmark, Max (1980), *La philosophie chinoise*, Paris: Presses Universitaire de France.
- Lewis, Mark Edward (2007), *The Early Empires Qin and Han*, Belkamp, Harvard University Press.
- Marx, Karl (1975), *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, CW/3, London, Lawrence & Wishart.
- Mou, Bo (ed.), (2009), *History of Chinese Philosophy*, London/New York: Routledge.
- Voegelin, Eric (2000), *Order and History*, vol. IV, *The Ecumenical Age*, Columbia, University of Missouri Press.
- Wang, Aihe (2000), *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early Chine*, Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, Max (1951), *The Religion of China. The Sociology of Confucianism and Daoism*, Free Press, Illinois.
- Wittfogel, Karl (1957), *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

Contact

Vlad Mureşan, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of European Studies, Str. Emanuel de Martonne, nr. 1, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Email: vladmuresan22@gmail.com