

Huang Zongxi's and John Locke's Rhetoric toward Modernity

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Abstract

Huang Zongxi was an influential seventeenth century Chinese political and social theorist who is considered by many to be the inspiration and founding father of democracy and human rights in China. This article examines the many similarities in thought and social influence between Huang and his contemporary, the English philosopher John Locke. Each is considered the Father of Enlightenment in his own country and played a major role in similar movements toward modernity and democracy. Among other shared views, both questioned the divine right of kings and saw the purpose of government as promoting the common good.

Key words: Locke; Huang; Wang Yangming; absolute monarchy; democratic theory

“Great minds think alike.” This is an apt saying for the unexpected similarities between Chinese philosopher Huang Zongxi (or Tsung-Hsi) and his English contemporary John Locke. Both Locke (1632-1704) and Huang (1610-1695) were important seventeenth century political and social theorists whose work would shake their countrymen's worldviews and change the histories of their nations. Their rhetoric toward modernity shared many significant characteristics, although some differences exist due to cultural and historical backgrounds.

Both were strongly influenced by their fathers, who were involved in the political conflicts of their time. Locke's father was a Puritan country lawyer and a clerk to the Justices of the Peace in Chew Magna, who had served as a cavalry captain for the Parliamentarian forces during the early years of the English Civil War. Huang's father was a Ming governmental official and one of the famous “Seven Donglinⁱ Gentlemen” who fought against eunuch power in the royal court and endangered their own lives. His father died in prison in 1626.

Both Huang and Locke lived in a transitional time period. Huang lived through the political and military conflicts that ended the Ming dynasty in 1644 when it was replaced by the victorious Manchu Qing dynasty. Similarly, Locke lived during the English civil wars from 1642 to 1651 which saw the defeat and execution of King Charles I, the temporary rule of the Puritans under Cromwell, and the royal restoration of Charles II in 1660. Their later political involvement was limited by the changing political fortunes of the factions with which they were associated. Huang distanced himself from government and focused on his work. He refused the Qing emperor's invitation to join the imperial court in Beijing, remaining in his home town in Zhejiang province. Locke spent several years in France and later in Holland to escape a temporarily unfavorable political environment in England for Puritans.

Both further developed the work of the thinkers who influenced them. Huang inherited the long tradition of Confucianism, an earthly, rather than religious, philosophy that emphasizes human relationships including the relationships between human beings and between people, the government and nature. Anything that would affect these relationships became a concern of Confucian scholars. Wang Yangming'sⁱⁱ (1472-1529) philosophy of the heart and mind inspired Huang most, just as Hobbes' political philosophy influenced Locke. Both Huang and Locke had long-lasting impacts on their societies. Huang nurtured many enlightenment scholars in China, notably the nationalist Wang Fuzhi, who remained loyal to the Ming emperors, and Liang Qichao, governmental reform advocate during the Qing dynasty. More importantly, Sun Yatsen, who became the first president of the Republic of China in 1912 after the downfall of the Qing dynasty, also drew on Huang's democratic and humanistic ideas. Sun reprinted the political ideas "On the Ruler" and "On the Officials" from Huang's major work *Waiting for the Dawn: a Plan for the Prince* (deBary, 1993) and widely distributed them as pamphlets during the 1911 revolutionary period. Despite Locke's enormous influence on Western ideology and liberal movements, Huang's contributions may have been even more valuable for a nation hungry for modern democracy but ruled by an autocratic dynastic regime without a free intellectual environment or contact with the outside world.

Absolute Monarchy and Government

Both thinkers refuted their forefather's ideas on the divine origin of royal authority and advanced the democratic idea that the ruler should govern in the interest of the people's wellbeing. As Huang expressed his doubts about the divine or heavenly bestowed authority of the king or the prince, "Could it be that Heaven and Earth, in their all-encompassing care, favor one man and one family among millions of men and myriads of families?" (deBary, 1993, p. 92). Similarly, Locke refuted the doctrine of the divine and absolute right of kings as advocated by conservative theorist Sir Robert Filmer, who sought to draw a direct line from the authority God granted to Adam to the power of contemporary kings. Locke (2005d) challenged that argument, writing that "yet the knowledge of which is the eldest line of Adam's posterity being so long since utterly lost, that in the races of mankind and families of the world, there remains not to one above another the least pretence to be the eldest house, and to have the right of inheritance" (p. 17).

In *Waiting for the Dawn*, Huang argued that the correct attitude a king or prince should hold toward his citizens was to serve the common good. He also maintained that officials should work for the wellbeing of the people rather than for the emperor. He wrote that "In the beginning of human society each man lived for himself and looked to his own interests" (deBary, 1993, p. 91). Therefore, no one promoted the common good or eliminated social evils, but instead pursued selfish desires. However, then rulers came into being and they alone became masters of society, able to do whatever they pleased, including slaughter, maiming, and debauchery. Then, when their descendants inherited this power, a vicious circle of harm to

civilians was created. Thus, Huang claimed that it is the king who created the most harm for if there were no king, each man “could have looked to his own interests” (p. 92) Similarly, in his *First Treatise on Government*, Locke (2005c) asked, “[H]ow will the possession even of the whole earth give anyone a sovereign arbitrary authority over the persons of men?” (p. 7). In his view, God would never grant a ruler an absolute private dominion such as the power to deny his subjects food, starving them whenever they were not obedient.

In sections 90 and 91 of the *Second Treatise*, Locke (2005d) argued that once men left the state of nature, in which each person had the right to punish transgressions against him, to join in a commonwealth or political society, they delegated the power to make and enforce laws to the civil authorities, subject to the will of the majority, and were able to appeal to a judge or recognized authority for redress of injuries. Absolute monarchy was inconsistent with this civil government because there was no authority to which the ruler's actions could be appealed.

Mind and Knowledge

Both Huang and Locke believed that human beings are born with innocent minds that are shaped by life experiences and rejected the existence of innate knowledge or principles. Locke's metaphysical ideas, as expressed in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (2005a), consider the human epistemological state at birth to be a tabula rasa or blank slate, similar to Huang's metaphysical thinking in the Chinese tradition based either in Taoism or in the *Book of Changes (I Ching)*. Both Huang and Locke considered human understanding to be a reaction to specific stimuli such as color, smell and taste. Thus, experience shapes human subjectivity and action. In these beliefs, Huang was a follower, active advocate and passionate developer of Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind, which also postulated that human judgment should be directed toward good through experience and retrospection, a notion similar to Locke's conception of knowledge coming through experience in the form of sensory perceptions and mental reflection. Wang Yangming's philosophy of the mind employs a kind of relativism which maintains that when the mind's principles of judgment change, everything else should change too. Samuel Zinaich (2006) similarly regards Locke's moral philosophy as belonging to the relativist tradition.

Education

Additionally, because of the importance both Huang and Locke gave to experience, they emphasized the role of education as a means to achieve human perfectibility, advancing toward virtue in a democratic society where the common good would be realized. During Huang's lifetime, the government bureaucracy was run by officials recruited through a rigorous civil service examination that tested classical literacy and mastery of Confucian thought. To prepare students for the examinations, a national state school system extended down to the prefecture and county levels. These were not schools for the mass of the population but places where those who had already obtained a private classical education would specialize in preparation for the civil service examination (see Elman, 1989, pp. 382-383). In the “Schools” chapter of *Waiting for*

the Dawn, Huang advocated that the schools be places for political debate, where excellent governmental officials could be fostered and selected through free discussion and democratic elections. He argued that everything needed for governing the state should be derived from such schools. He maintained that judgments about good and evil and the conduct of state affairs should not be decided by the emperor alone, but rather through public debate in the schools. Therefore, the school, in Huang's view, is the highest administrative institution where political affairs should be decided. Different levels of officials should be trained to develop their democratic capabilities and then monitored in their political performance after graduation. Additionally, schools should focus upon academic knowledge and cultural foundations while developing citizens' ability to participate in governmental affairs so as to lay a foundation for democratic politics. Huang asserted that the prosperity of the schools would lead to the prosperity of society.

However, Huang held that in a feudal autocracy, the schools had lost their political function of participating in state affairs and educating outstanding officials. The root cause of this lay not in the schools themselves but in the loyal court's totalitarianism. Therefore, he recommended the reformation of the education system to establish different levels of schools throughout the nation. Most importantly, he urged that school officials be selected through public debate among the students, not by the government or the loyal court. The result he envisioned was control and supervision of the government by elite scholars; with politics controlled by unselfish academics, the regime would govern in the interest of the people.

Moreover, Huang's ambition was to change society through mass education by establishing as many schools as possible and eliminating illiteracy. In Huang's plan, the students and teachers would be concerned with state affairs and use their knowledge for pragmatic and virtuous purposes in accordance with the Confucian ideal of gentlemen. For Huang, educational reform was a precondition for democratic political reform. His reform proposals in "The Schools" greatly influenced subsequent educational and democratic reform efforts.

Approximately two hundred years later toward the end of the Qing dynasty, reformers such as Kang Youwei, advocate of a constitutional monarchy, and Liang Qichao, Kang's student, incorporated Huang's ideas into the short lived Hundred Day's Reform of 1898. Under their influence, the young emperor Guangxu, before being deposed, issued more than 40 reform edicts including the creation of a new educational system and abolition of the traditional civil service examinations based on the Chinese Classics. As highly democratic as Huang's proposals were, they were also utopian in that they contemplated too elevated a function for intellectuals and the educational system.

Although Locke's principle of good or virtue is based on Christianity whereas Huang's vision of moral perfection is based on Confucianism, their ideas on education are much the same. Colman (1983) writes that "Making men alive to virtue is the chief task Locke allots to the educator" (p. 206). Locke's educational theory is itself founded on a psychology of human action, which mirrors Huang's adherence to Wang Yangming's fundamental principle of the unity of action and knowledgeⁱⁱⁱ. The rationale Locke shares with Huang is that human beings

can choose to be virtuous when their characters have been shaped by a good education. However, the individual's judgment concerning what is the moral thing to do depends on circumstances, which, according to Colman (1983, p. 224), brings Locke to the edge of relativism, another similarity to Huang's moral philosophy. Both see educational reform as important for democratic reform. Locke thought that the content of education should vary according to social class. Gentlemen required a superior education that would prepare them to serve in positions of political leadership similar to the scholar officials advocated by Huang. In addition to mastery of English, he recommended the introduction of contemporary foreign languages, history, geography, economics, math and science, which is similar to Huang's advocacy of practical disciplines such as natural sciences and engineering to supplement a good command of Chinese classics and historical knowledge. In contrast, Locke believed that education for the common man could be limited to instruction in the Bible and a vocational skill.

Law and Government

Both Huang and Locke emphasized the importance of law that served all the people. Huang's assertion at the end of his chapter "On Law" that "when we have governance by law can we have governance by men" (deBary, 1993, p. 99) expresses the essence of his viewpoint. Genuine law should be timeless and protect the common welfare of citizens and the society or else it should not be called law. Huang claimed that in ancient China's Three Dynasties^{iv}, law was set up in the interest of the whole nation, not just to benefit the rulers. However, after that period, law was transformed to serve the purely selfish ends of the king and his ruling house, especially his sons. This dynastic law was illegitimate, because it did not fulfill the spirit of the law, which was to seek the common good. Huang argued that the spirit of the law was much more important than its content. He also maintained that the content and form of the law were in contradiction. The law's form, or appearance of responding to external and transcendent elements such as divine mission, rationality, and the common will, concealed its true content that only fulfilled the will of a certain class or group. Huang's separation of the form and content of the law made its hypocrisy clear to the people.

Huang further discussed two methods in setting up laws: "shu" and "mi"^v literally meaning the establishment of laws in simplicity and complexity. In an ideal politics, Huang claimed, the fewer laws, the less crime. Taken to the extreme, no law at all would ensure stability and should be called the law without law. However, Huang's ideal of a society without law cannot be found in reality because this ideal society would be governed by moral principles, on the assumption that everyone under heaven was morally unselfish, which is not possible. In fact, selfish conflicts over property required the creation of the legal system which had to be complex and comprehensive or else inadequate laws themselves might bring forth chaos. Therefore, law had to fulfill the role that morality would play in an ideal world; the imposition of law compensated for people's failure to adhere to the dictates of morality. However, Huang claimed that the law was not an end in itself, but should serve the people and society. He identified as a great evil that, in practice, the law actually deprived people of their rights.

In one of his earliest works, *Essays of the Laws of Nature* (2005b) Locke argues that natural law is divine will which can be discovered by human reason and is the source of human virtue. The later creation of civil law derives its legitimacy from conformity with this natural law. Locke writes “this law of nature can be described as being the decree of the divine will discernible by the light of nature and indicating what is and what is not in conformity with rational nature” (cited in Gaela Esperana, 2006, p. 31) and “positive civil laws are not binding by their own nature or force or in any other way than in virtue of the law of nature” (cited in Gaela Esperanza, 2006, p. 35). This is similar to Huang's theories about the ideal society being governed by morality.

In Chapter I of Locke's *The Second Treatise on Government* (2005d), he defines political power as the right to make and enforce laws for the protection and regulation of property^{vi} for the public good. In chapter II, to explain the origin of political power, Locke contrasts it to an original state of nature, in which men were equal and existed in “a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man” (p. 17). Moreover, in this state of nature, human beings, as free and equal individuals, had the right and responsibility to punish transgressions against their life, liberty and possessions in proportion to the harm done. In Chapter VIII Locke identifies consent to majority rule as the basis for the formation of political society and lawful government. In Chapter IX, he argues that men are willing to relinquish the freedom of the state of nature for the greater security of political society. To protect their lives, liberty and possessions, he identifies three necessary elements: laws accepted by consent, a recognized impartial body to judge behavior and disputes, and the ability to enforce these judgments. This leads him in later chapters to theorize the separation of powers. He envisions a government with different branches, including a strong legislature, and an active executive, both acting in the public interest. Toward the end of the treatise in Chapter XIX, Locke addresses the dissolution of a government that has become tyrannical. He makes a strong argument that tyranny exists when the legislative or executive authorities systematically abuse their power for an extended period of time to advance their own interests instead of the good of the people. When the government violates the people's trust in this way, it loses legitimacy and the people have the right to dissolve and replace it.

Conclusion

Both Huang and Locke were Enlightenment forerunners whose seventeenth century ideas on moral philosophy, political reform, education and the psychology of self inspired later generations' democratic and scientific endeavors. One in the East, the other in the West, simultaneously they moved two civilizations toward modernity.

Despite being grounded in the different historical and cultural traditions of European Christianity and Chinese Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, they came to similar conclusions that legitimate government rested on the consent of the governed and should serve the common good. Locke laid the basis for French Declaration of Human Rights and the

American Declaration of Independence. Huang's work served as a precedent for later Chinese democratic intellectuals such as Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei, Sun Yatsen, and many others. It is not an exaggeration to say that without Huang's efforts, the Republic of China could not have been founded and people in China today could not look back in history for the example of a democratic group of people willing to make a difference by sacrificing to build a more democratic government.

Although the two Enlightenment fathers have much in common, differences exist. The Puritan Locke believed that human nature is sinful because of his Christian background and the doctrine of original sin, whereas Huang, in the tradition of Confucian philosophers such as Mencius (fourth century B.C.E.) thought that human nature is good. Politically, Locke is more committed to the democratic struggle for people's rights, whereas Huang seems to yield to the authority of kingship in the form of the benevolent sage king who would listen to non-self interested scholar officials like Huang himself and use the power of the throne to make the nation democratic. Locke's works ranged from social issues of politics and economy to more personal concerns like marriage and happiness whereas Huang's works mainly dealt with larger issues such as history, politics, economy, astronomy, and literature. The two social theorists and rhetors, through their political, philosophical, and economic writings, raised fundamental questions about the mind, psychology, political democracy and human rights for their contemporary readers as well as future generations to ponder.

This paper has been an effort to let East meet West and bridge the two civilizations by initiating a conversation with the reader on the continuing relevance of Huang and Locke's ideas. Readers can weigh and judge the wisdom of their powerful rhetoric that would resolutely lead their countrymen and even the world to a better future.

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ⁱ Donglin were private Confucian academies that became centers of political dissent during the late Ming dynasty.

ⁱⁱ Wang Yangming is considered one of the most important philosophers in the neo-Confucian tradition. He is known for affirming the essential goodness of human nature, for his theory of the unity of knowledge and action, and for seeing social well-being as dependent on personal morality. See Wang Yangming (1572-1529) in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/wangyang>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wang writes that "'knowledge is the direction for action and action the effort of knowledge, and that knowledge is the beginning of action and action the completion of knowledge'" (Wang, 1963, p. 11). See also "The Unity of Knowledge and Action" at <http://bhoffert.faculty.noctrl.edu/HST330/25.WangYangming.html>.

^{iv} The Xia (Hsia,) Shang and Chou (Zhou) dynasties from the late third millennium BCE to about 221 BCE.

^v Chinese pinyin "shu" and "mi."

^{vi} In Chapter IX, Section 123, Locke, explains that he uses "property" as an inclusive term to describe people's "lives, liberties and estates."