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The mutual perception of the Chinese people and American people is a fascinating theme of historical research, and it is of relevance to the two nations' relationship in the twenty-first century. Readers can get a glimpse of how Chinese elites in the late nineteenth century perceived Europe in the research on the journalist Wang Tao, and what Chinese diplomats learned from Meiji Japan during their visits.¹ For Chinese people's jottings of their visits to and views of America, readers might directly engage with a translated volume of primary sources edited by Leo Lee and David Arkush.² Against this background of understanding the historical cross-cultural epistemology, Sam Wong and Brian Wong present a compelling alternative in their article "Chinese Perceptions of American Democracy: Late Qing Observers and Their Experiences with the Chinese Exclusion Act."

The article challenges existing literatures on the Chinese impression of the West in the late nineteenth century by breaking the 'advanced West/Japan versus backward China' mindset. From the above-mentioned works and primary sources, the reader usually gets the impression that Chinese visitors were struck by the high level of technological advancement, urban management, modern education, and gender equality, and that Chinese reformers frequently referred to these positive impressions of the West and Japan to promote their agenda of reforming China. However, according to Wong and Wong, the writing of Kuang Qizhao, a late Qing dictionary compiler, translator, reformer, and critical observer of America was unique in that Kuang's English proficiency was high enough for him to engage with American politics and society in a way that was deeper than most of Chinese visitors of his time. Based upon his longer sojourn in the U.S. as the translator for the China Education Mission (CEM) and his understanding of Confucianism and Christianity, Kuang developed a much more profound view of the American civilization that has been overlooked by many past studies.

Sam Wong and Brian Wong show that Kuang was highly skeptical of American democracy, and that he was not interested in introducing American democracy to his Chinese readers. For Kuang, the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 was an immense blow that revealed to him the "fatal weakness" of the American system, which could be abused by

¹ For Wang Tao's life, career, and his understanding of China and the West, see Paul Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang Tao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China* (Cambridge: Harvard Council on East Asian Studies, 1974) and for Chinese diplomats' impression on Japan and their understanding of the West via their Japan experience, see Douglas Reynolds with Carol Reynolds, *East Meets East: Chinese Discover the Modern World in Japan, 1854-1898. A Window on the Intellectual and Social Transformation of Modern China* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2014).

² R. David Arkush and Leo O. Lee, *Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

“demagogues” through “manipulat[ing] public opinion” (320). Kuang observed that electoral politics in the U.S. were based upon appeals to racism and populism in its practice.

Despite his fluency in English, however, Kuang still had a deeply ingrained Confucian mindset, and he thought that “democracy had a major weakness in that it failed to consider morality” (322). He was convinced that the “ineffectiveness of the U.S. political and legal institutions” was caused by the country’s “morally incompetent leaders” (325). Kuang’s emphasis on the importance of morally “qualified leaders” was certainly Confucianist, which is perhaps unsurprising in the East Asian context historically and even in the present. But this criticism was a lone voice among Kuang’s Chinese contemporaries, few of whom closely observed and analyzed the American electoral politics as he did.

At the same time, Kuang Qizhao was not a Confucian fundamentalist or a believer of the moral absolutism of Neo-Confucianism that arose under the southern Song dynasty, and he expressed his skepticism of Buddhism and Daoism. For him, one viable Chinese ancient institution was the Civil Service Examination which could help select qualified political leaders, and he cautioned against giving power to common people who were not properly educated. Yet, Kuang never opposed democracy in principle, and he fully supported a “free press” (330). It is notable that it was Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China, who retained the modified Civil Examination System and made it one of the ‘five branches’ of checks and balances under the Republican system of China along with the legislature, judiciary, administration, and another Chinese historical legacy, control.

Although he observed American politics from a Confucian vantage point, Kuang Qizhao “immersed himself in the study of [the] Bible” (332) and he treated the Confucian tradition selectively by favoring pre-Qin “classical Confucianism” rather than later “imperial Confucianism,” let alone the “three bonds” (334) imposed on women, which violated Kuang’s advocacy of universal education. According to Wong and Wong, this vision of a new culture for the humankind, in which both Chinese and American civilizations were compatible and equivalent to each other, and thus Christianity, as well as the personality of Jesus Christ, was for Kuang relevant “in creating a common universal morality” (336). It is clear that Kuang was not questioning the practice of American democracy to deride it *in toto*. Instead, he was skeptical of only some concrete phenomena in their implementation, yet with a bigger vision in which the best of the East and Western cultures could be combined to construct a common future for humanity.

One unintended consequence, as Wong and Wong point out, was that Kuang’s critical observation of the weakness of American democracy, such as the prevalence of populism, was used by the more conservative high-ranking reformer-officials Zhang Zhidong, for whom Kuang worked as a translator upon his return to China. Zhang never visited America but, based on his interpretation of Kuang’s writings, inveighed against democracy and its supporters and opposed the empowerment of the people. In this sense, the excessively pessimistic view of American democracy might have provided fuel for an anti-democracy trend of thought in late imperial China.

A study of late Qing intellectual history, the article is highly original and thought-provocative. It challenges the past stereotype that late Qing Chinese reform-minded elites were eager to learn from European, American, and Japanese progresses. Wong and Wong show that a foreign observer and bilingual reformer like Kuang could spot many weaknesses in American democracy and could use Confucian high moralism as a yardstick to measure American democracy. Yet, Kuang made a unique intellectual contribution in that he neither created a China vs. the United States, or East vs. West binary opposition nor called for Confucianism’s spread to the West to solve its problems. As Wong and Wong point out, Kuang envisioned a fusion of East and West, Confucianism and Christianity, and to be sure, we might fairly call him a moralist. But his emphasis on the moral basis of democracy and the significant role of education in implementing high-quality democracy can still be a valuable intellectual asset today when there are worries about the decay of democracy and its crumbling in recently democratized societies today.

Wong and Wong’s extensive use of the available primary sources is commendable. These sources range from edited volumes to a large quantity of unpublished archival materials, Chinese and American newspapers, and personal correspondence, especially those which are housed in local archives such as Connecticut Historical Society. The article contributes to and

complicates the narrative of late Qing intellectual history in terms of the Chinese view of America by providing details of Kuang Qizhao's observations, reflections, comparisons, criticism, and his tentative solution when he was fully confronted with the less-than-perfect implementation of American democracy.

The article's weakness, however, is its lack of contextualization of Kuang's articulation and the absence of a stronger conclusion. For instance, the authors refer to Kuang as one of the late Qing "moderate reformers" and "self-strengtheners" (342) at the very end of the article and argue that they as a group should not be regarded as only "conservative" or "retrograde" (342), but Kuang as a single case might be inadequate to defy the stereotype. Further, if there were already a group of "moderate reformers" and "self-strengtheners" who were less conservative, and Kuang was but one of them, why was his realistic understanding of democracy and Chinese and American cultures unique compared with that of the others? The authors could have strengthened their argument by further emphasizing the difference between reformers who had real and long enough life experiences in the United States and those who did not. The Yale-trained Yung Wing, Kuang's friend and colleague at CEM, whom the authors mention in the article, offers another example of a reformer with in-depth knowledge of America, compared with those who never set foot on America and those who had only brief and sketchy impressions. Thus, the authors can easily argue for the importance of an immersed life experience and in-depth analysis to facilitate deeper cross-cultural understanding. They could have made another case about how Kuang, in his perception of how U.S. politics and society transcended the China/U.S. dichotomy and assumed supremacy of Confucianism, sought a universal solution for humanity to which Confucianism could contribute. This thesis, if more clearly stated and followed through, will allow readers to ponder the shared problems and possible common solutions for different societies in the twenty-first century, such as the lack of moral virtue among political leaders and the importance of education for high-quality democracy.

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