

Comparison of Huang Zongxi and Thomas More's Political Philosophies Contents, Effects and Respective Backgrounds

Feichi Deng

Friends' Central School, Ardmore 19003, United States

Abstract. In both Renaissance England and the transition period from Ming to Qing in China, a wave of governmental idealism emerged that constantly evoked scholarly interests. The extent to which Huang Zongxi and Thomas More defined their state idealism differently deserves serious consideration, as an examination of the difference may shed light on the fundamental Sino-European divergences. I hope my work will not only shed light on the two men's thoughts, but also help to further our understanding of civilizational differences between China and the West. In previous research, Huang Zongxi had been widely compared with the French thinker Rousseau. According to some, these two men lived in the same "breath", with Huang being the "Chinese Rousseau". This widely held perception, however, is mistaken in several ways. Huang's work *Waiting for the Dawn* should not be seen as mere critiques against imperial china, but as a blueprint for a Chinese version of Utopia. Instead of emphasizing the revolutionary elements in Huang's work as in most previous research, this paper focuses on its continuation with traditional Confucian thoughts, noting key convergences. Thomas More's *Utopia*, on the other hand, offered an ideal example for comparison. With similar historical and personal contexts, I believed Huang and More reflected civilizational difference between pre-modern China and Europe. While China and the West slid gradually into hostility and distrust, it is an important task for scholars to examine their respective political traditions. This essay aims to compare Huang Zongxi's *Waiting for the Dawn* with Thomas More's *Utopia*, noting both convergences and divergences.

Keywords: Utopia; Meritocracy; China; West; Political Philosophies.

1. Introduction

Before examining the two men's work, it is important to understand the historical contexts from which Huang and More drew their works. Born during the reign of Emperor Wanli, Huang Zongxi enjoyed the last epoch of peace and tranquility in the Ming Dynasty. Huang's father, a member of the Donglin Movement, no doubt immersed his son in an education that emphasized moral purity and spiritual idealism. Unsurprisingly, Huang became a leading member in the Movement's fight against the eunuchs during the reign of Chongzhen, the last emperor of Ming. When the dynasty collapsed in 1644, Huang fled south, organizing his own resistance movement against Manchurians. When the anti-Qing movement lost momentum, Huang went and lived in seclusion, where he completed *Waiting for the Dawn*, his most influential work. Unlike other periods of dynastic change in China, Manchurians that succeeded Ming were widely perceived by Chinese as the barbaric Mongols. The Manchu conquest in China was met with heavy resistance, usually organized by classical scholars like Huang. The ultimate defeat of the Ming Restoration Movement no doubt planted a bitter seed inside scholars like Huang, forcing him to live as a hermit. Indeed, the "dawn" Huang envisioned in his work never came true. As the Manchus firmly established their dominance over China, their policies became increasingly repressive, illustrated by the practice of literary inquisition. The China that Huang envisioned had sailed further and further away.

Born in a family of lawyers, Thomas More followed his father's expectations. Upon receiving an education of Greek and Latin from Oxford, More launched into politics. Representing London in Parliament first, he later accompanied the Holy Roman emperor Charles V on a diplomatic mission. Climbing the political ladder with dazzling speed, he became an influential advisor to Henry VIII, the king of England. Living under and later serving close to Henry VIII no doubt exerted a great influence upon More. Best known for his extravagant spending and six marriages, Henry VIII was considered by some to be one of the most notorious monarchs on the British throne. At the later stage of his reign, Henry VIII was characterized as lustful and tyrannical. No wonder that in *Utopia*,

Raphael, a fictional character, urged More to reform British politics based on the Utopian model. More's Utopian ideals met a sad fate similar to Huang. As British might grew, foreign wars became violent and frequent, departing from More's Utopian pacifism. The agrarian heaven fantasized by More was made obsolete by Britain's increasing industrial capacity and concentration of labor.

Main body

2. Respective Historical Contexts

Both Huang and More had reason for nostalgia. Living in late Ming, Huang suffered from waves of political persecution, first from the eunuchs; then from the Southern Ming court. He witnessed the downfall of a dynasty that remained stable until the past decade. The sudden Manchu conquest in China brought extraordinary violence and forceful abandonment of Chinese traditions, which Huang deeply regretted. The Manchu tyranny, together with the ultimate deprivation of Southern Ming, forced Huang to envision new paths for Chinese governance.

Serving one of the infamous kings in Europe, Thomas More certainly endured under an atmosphere of obedience and terror. The new possibilities opened by the discovery of the new world also found its way into More, who in Utopia expressed the wish to reform Europeans based on the superior model of the new world: "...any nation in that new world is better governed than those among us!"

3. Tonal Subtleties

Perhaps a key difference between Huang and More was the tone they employed in their work. Huang's work, written in seclusion, was serious in its attempt to reform Chinese politics. As he laid out in preface, the issue at Huang's hand was to address the perpetual disorder: "How is it that since the Three Dynasties there has been no order but only disorder?"[1] Huang was set to provide a solution for China's ill-fated dynasties, a grand project rarely countered by former Chinese thinkers. More, on the other hand, was more evasive about his purpose in writing. For the most part, the work moved back and forth between conversations and monologues by the fictional figure Raphael. During these long periods of monologue, it seemed as if Raphael and the writer behind him was merely the new Marco Polo, introducing the wonder of an exotic world. Yet at the end of Utopia, More suddenly appeared before the readers, delivering his critique on British society. There were good reasons to suspect that More's vagueness was intentional. Serving as a close associate for Henry VIII, it was unwise for More to criticize his master with such vehemence. Huang, living as a hermit, did not share such concerns.

4. Treatments of Antiquity

Writing tones are inextricably connected to Huang and More's treatment of antiquity. At the first glance, Thomas More's Utopia and Huang Zongxi's Waiting for the Dawn were similar at least in their treatment of antiquity. Utopia was a fictional work inspired by the renewed interests in the Greeks and Romans, while Waiting for the Dawn was mirrored in antiquity, bringing the path forward. Yet a closer examination of the work yields more differences than similarities in their treatment of antiquity.

4.1 Huang's Use of Antiquity

One of the fundamentals of Waiting for the Dawn was Huang's use of the "Three Dynasties". According to Huang, the Three Dynasties in the past offered shining examples of Chinese governance. He opened the chapter "On Law" by claiming that "Until the end of the Three Dynasties there was Law. Since the Three Dynasties there has been no law." He certainly believed the Three Dynasties represented an ideal political model intentionally neglected by past rulers. Despite such frequent references to the Three Dynasties, Huang never articulated the specifics of Three Dynasties. Readers

are not told, for example, where the Three Dynasties were located in time. Indeed, the term “Three Dynasties” seems to interchange frequently with similar verses, including “ancient times.” Huang went into specific historical periods in Chinese history during his discussion of the selection of scholar-officials. During the T’ang Dynasty, Huang wrote, candidates were examined in the “composition of poetry”, something in sharp contrast with the Ming examination. Similar critiques were launched against the present system based on past dynasties. Thus, it shall be said with certainty that Huang idealized history as a collective whole, with the Three Dynasties as a state of perfection. For Huang, the progression of history was indeed a tale of political decay, with systems falling apart gradually from one dynasty to the next. While the Three Dynasties represented the ultimate ideal, the latter dynasties were at least admirable parts until we reached the deplorable era Huang lived in. Following the stance of Chinese historians since Confucius, Huang portrayed the Three Dynasties as a state of Chinese perfection.

4.2 More’s Use of Antiquity

Trained as a classical scholar since his years in Oxford, Thomas More possessed a nostalgic touch toward ancient Greece. The world of Utopia, according to More, had “many harbors, with its cities fortified.” Such a typical Greek landscape, together with its fifty-four states, unequivocally presented More’s utopia as an idealized blend of Greece and Britain. Raphael, the narrator in the fiction, even brought Greek literature to the utopians, who “read the best of the Greek authors very exactly.” Surprised by the Utopian’s extraordinary capacity to absorb Greek culture, Raphael concluded that the Utopians “learned that language the more easily from its having some relation to their own.” Raphael even suspected that Utopia was a “colony of Greece.” For Thomas More, the Utopian culture was connected to ancient Greece in a spiritual sense. The landscape described above certainly validated the comparison. Culturally and geographically, More appropriated ancient Greece into his work as this idealized state in the new world. Just as Rousseau constructed his thesis on the state of nature not as a reality but as a mirror reflecting upon humanity’s flaws, More presented antiquity as a similar mirror against contemporary British society.

4.3 Restoration Versus Mirroring

As I stated above, both Huang and More invoked the concept of antiquity frequently in their works. However, the two men differed in their treatment of antiquities in significant ways, illustrating the essential divergence on the matter of antiquity between China and the West.

For Huang, the concept of the Three Dynasties was not merely nostalgia. The Dynasties represented the state of perfection, having achieved what was to be achieved. The millennia after the Three Dynasties were a sad tale of historical decay, where the state of perfection was gradually lost. Indeed, Huang still found the dynasties in decay admirable in parts, yet they remain lacking in the ultimate ideal of order. According to Huang, the project for China at hand was to reconstruct the past, a “revival of the glories of the Three Dynasties.” In his treatment of antiquity, Huang was following the example of Confucius. For Confucius in the Spring and Autumn period, the former Zhou dynasty had already achieved the ultimate harmony. It was the decay in the greatness of Zhou that brought all-under-heaven into chaos. Thus, the task for Confucius’s contemporaries was not to construct a better future, but to bring antiquity back to life. Just like Confucius, Huang considered antiquity superior to the present, Henry Kissinger once remarked that Chinese civilization’ was conservative in nature. Indeed, Chinese history of thought was marked by fervent idealizations of antiquity. Historical idealism from Confucius to Huang aimed to restore history, not as a mirror.

Thomas More did not present Utopia as a case for the restoration of history. Despite his clear affection for Greek culture, his references remained veiled. Rarely did he explicitly mention the term “Greece” in Utopia. It could be argued that More’s Utopia shared its contours with Greece, yet he never intended to equate the two. When Raphael marveled at Utopians’ adaptation to Greek culture, he sent an implicit message to separate the two. The Utopians were simply connected, but not identical to the Greeks. Utopia was better understood as a state in the new world covered in the veil of antiquity,

since More never intended his Utopia to be a replica for Greece. As he laid out in the final words of the book, Utopia served as a critique against British society, a “commonwealth that truly deserves its name.” For More, Britain at the time was a corrupt state posing as a commonwealth. More seemed to construct his utopia as the idealized Britain, where all the British flaws solved with Greece as its model. As a result, it is more apt to characterize utopia as a critique of Britain on the model of antiquity. More may be a sympathizer of the Greek world, but he did not plan to reconstruct British society entirely based upon the blueprint of antiquity.

5. Meritocratic Governance

5.1 Huang’s Meritocratic Utopia

Besides, both men show great divergence in their concepts of meritocracy. In other words, the governmental blueprint for Huang and More diverged significantly. Huang, for his part, concerned himself primarily with the improvement of the imperial Chinese state. His revisionism toward the imperial system was exemplified first by his criticism toward meritocratic selection. The selection process in government, according to Huang, had become inverted. The selection process had become illiberal and stiff, causing a dangerous mismanagement of talent. For Huang, the multiplicity of governmental selection in the past had ensured no talent to be wasted. Upon passing each examination, the talented would be then examined the most rigorously by another ministry. Only after seven processes shall those men rise through the government ranks. For Huang, such a rigorous meritocracy was an essential component of his ideal state. Noting the deficiencies in the present selection process, Huang criticized the present heavily for its waste of talent in the selection process and the misuse of personnel in the employment process. This process is further disrupted by the privileged sons of high-ranking officials. According to Huang, the sons of officials holding the third rank shall be dismissed if they are unsuccessful in Imperial College. Favors and preferences “cannot be shown to the sons of elite.” Huang’s concern, however, did not involve education only. His fear was that the sons of high officials may be placed higher than they deserve. While the “capable ones are involved in the usual slow process of advancement, the incapables are placed in positions of power.” For Huang, the meritocratic issue was linked with hierarchical powers of the privileged sons.

Nevertheless, Huang was not a tacitly legitimized this system of hierarchy to a certain extent. In the same passage of critique against privilege, he advised the sons of officials holding the sixth rank to enter provincial schools, while sons of higher officials shall be admitted to the Imperial College. Thus, Huang was merely seeking a more effective meritocracy, not questioning the system of hierarchy from its foundation. Only concerned with the technicalities of the selection process, Huang remained rooted in the Confucian tradition, emphasizing the role of literary classical education. For Huang, an ideal meritocracy was by and large based upon imperial examination and virtue. Huang remained a revisionist of Chinese governance, seeking meritocratic reforms.

5.2 More’s Meritocratic Restraint

In Utopia, Thomas More said little about meritocracy. Only in a brief passage did he turn to the government. Scholars in Utopia, chosen by priests and approved by magistrates, were excused my work. The government officials would be drawn from these learned men. More did not put forward a criterion for becoming a scholar, only that anyone making a “considerable advancement in study” shall be admitted as a scholar-official. The Utopian system of government rested upon its democracy. The magistrates elected by families, would elect the prince. More established a typical three-tier popular democracy where the people had a significant say in government affairs. However, More stopped short of defining the necessary qualities for government officials. He seemed to imply that these magistrates shall be reputable men trusted by their electorate. Yet such vague characters lacked a viable meritocratic selection process, something all but absent from the Utopia. In general, Huang sought a meritocratic reform to bring virtuous men to politics, while More failed to deliver a detailed

selection system. In a certain sense, both Huang and More followed their respective civilization traditions, with Huang following on the Chinese meritocracy and More's Athenian democracy

6. Strategy Toward Obtaining Ideal Rulers

Huang and More's difference extended to their strategy of obtaining an ideal ruler. For Huang, Humans were selfish in nature. Such selfishness stood in stark contrast with the common benefit, which "no one seems to have promoted it." This was Huang's dilemma of governance. While common welfare was strictly necessary, human nature forbid men to pursue it. The dilemma was resolved through the emergence of wise men in antiquity, but such men of virtue were gone in Huang's time. For Huang, the reason behind this digression was the loss of internal moral cultivation. The princes, formerly thought of themselves as tenants, considered themselves master of all-under-heaven. Thus, the princes shall cultivate a new mindset modeled on antiquity. Recognizing the difficulty for such cultivation, Huang criticized hereditary monarchy and advised the throne be passed to men of virtue. In short, Huang's strategy to obtain ideal rulers emphasized internal cultivation of the princes.

Thomas More, however, favors a different strategy. The role of the prince in More's Utopia was rarely mentioned, usually subject to the democratically elected magistrates. The prince, despite its name, was elected by two hundred sycophants. He would be subject to various constraints that aimed to limit the extent of his power. Indeed, important matters would be referred to the council of whole island. Thus, More's utopia reduced the prince to a rubber stamp, managing the "warrants of marriage." The reason for this extraordinary lack of power seemed to lie in More's fear of a conspired tyranny that may bring the downfall of the democracy. As More stated, the rules shall prevent the prince and the Tranibors to "conspire to change the government and enslave the people." Thus, Thomas More offered a strategy of restraint to obtain ideal rulers. External laws, supervision would be duly applied to the prince, so that he would not step outside the boundary.

7. Conclusion

Emerging both from uncertain times, Huang Zongxi and Thomas More developed profoundly influential philosophies. This paper, however, showed that the two men's works were less revolutionary than previously thought. Huang, called by some as the Rousseau of China, followed strictly the Confucian tradition in terms of his treatment of antiquity and meritocratic government. His approach to reforms were revisionist, instead of revolutionary. More, on the other hand, also followed the Renaissance tradition of idealizing Greek culture. The Utopia that More conceived was closely affiliated with Greece, while its government seemed to be a blend of antiquity and contemporary Britain. Thus, More's utopia shall be seen as a British localization of the wider renaissance movement.

References

- [1] Huang, Zongxi. *Waiting for the Dawn*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, P.10-25.
- [2] More, Thomas. *Utopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. P.2-100.
- [3] Zhang Y Z. Monarch' Reform and Reforming Autocracy--A Comparison between Huang Zongxi's and Locke's Political Philosophy[J]. *Journal of Hangzhou Dianzi University (Social Sciences)*, 2008.