

1 | *Making the political*

How can our shared, humanly created environment be effectively transformed – to make it better, less confining, more tractable to our control? Is it even possible to change, in a spontaneous and non-coerced way, the social and political world we inhabit? If we are unwilling to accept coercive impositions by the state or the powers that be, it seems that only public or collective action has such a capacity. After all, when we as individuals act for social change, we usually do so within the parameters of an already existing set of institutional arrangements, histories, and social understandings, created and animated largely through the work of others. Innovation is an extension of these socially constituted practices, whose contradictions, gaps, or inadequacies engender change yet persist in constraining it. Hanna Pitkin echoes the beliefs of many when she notes that “for most of us . . . private, isolated acts will make little difference” for public life unless taken in concert with others.¹ Such intuitions find their most prominent institutionalization in democratic regimes, which for both normative and practical reasons facilitate collective as opposed to bureaucratic, dictatorial, or unilateral action. Participatory acts in public arenas – such as voting, collective protest, the exercise of and respect for free expression – coordinate a plurality of individual actions and authorize collective interventions in shared space.

But how, then, do new political movements get off the ground, from the ground? Can ordinary individuals act for change, even if no one has enough already in common to make those actions effective or legitimate? These are not simply academic considerations. Knowing what role individuals can play in collective transformation is crucial for those many instances where collective action is simply not forthcoming, or where social movements have not yet materialized. In many ways, this dilemma is reducible to that of political founding, which asks how we

¹ Pitkin, “Justice,” 344.

can take specifically *political* action if no political community has yet emerged – indeed, if no “we” yet exists even to wonder about the question. Both cases seem to require the intervention of an innovator, a founding father (or mother) who can call into being the community that underwrites political actions as much as political regimes. Yet these interventions are paradoxical – because “those who get together to constitute a new government are themselves unconstitutional.”² The entire community must somehow authorize its own being before any individual or small group of individuals can act upon, through, or in it – even as it is surely the community and its practices that make available all spaces for meaningful action.

Legitimacy is not the only paradox here, however. Consider those cases where the very communities that foster and make possible necessary political practices may be eroding, or where those persons inscribed as “citizens” in the law nevertheless lack the social practices, mutual recognition, and vocabulary that make “citizenship” meaningful. If democracy or liberalism or any other regime is simply not working – what then? Is top-down imposition the only alternative? This more difficult question of social change was faced by several generations of reformers in China around the turn of the twentieth century. For these radical thinkers, democracy and other forms of “Western” government held the promise of modernizing the imperial state, enlivening its masses, and making those in power accountable to those they governed – but fulfilling such a promise required that they succeed in building a new kind of regime with no precedent in Chinese history. China at that time was still a monarchy, ruled from the center by the emperor and his legions of trained bureaucrats. The emperor certainly enjoyed the putative authority to impose his sovereign will on the Chinese people, but to the surprise of many reformers, imperial command was not enough to make these Western institutions work. A republican convention and the nominal establishment of a constitutional order after the emperor was deposed in 1911 were equally ineffective, even as China grew weak in the face of foreign incursion, domestic unrest, and national debt.

At this time of unprecedented crisis, one influential thinker by the name of Zhang Shizhao (1881–1973) explored the possibility that individual action may be capable of bringing about a democratic regime

² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 176.

where one does not exist, and has never existed. He does not do so, however, by presuming that individuals are somehow ontologically prior to their political communities, that they can mimic benevolent dictators and force their view on others, or that they can act in an autonomous and unencumbered way. Instead, he reinterprets the sites and actions of political founding (*li guo*). For Zhang, founding does not mean the imposition of a sovereign will on an abject people, but the gradual reorientation of personal practices and outlooks toward unprecedented, society-wide ways of living and governing. This reformulation throws light not only on founding acts, but on all acts of everyday innovation that require, even as they call into being, an entire community to ensure their eventual execution. Theorizing within a tradition and to an audience that did not produce democratic practices like those in contemporary Britain and America, Zhang's task extends beyond simply identifying how a people (*min*) can call into being its government (*zheng*).³ Zhang also tries to explain how the individual self (*ji* or *wo*) can perform both the constituting of the people and the constituting of the government – indeed, *must* perform it, given the absence of widespread agreement and of shared democratic norms.

Zhang's efforts do not deny the efficacy and importance of collective action; they simply draw attention to the steps that take place before individual visions of change may culminate in collective support – whether as a means of invigorating public space, changing shared environments, or building institutions where none existed before. In other words, these steps do not assume but actually “make the political” (*wei zheng*), as Zhang phrases it,⁴ under conditions that are deeply fragmented and (to many of Zhang's readers) completely hopeless. He must explain to his dispirited contemporaries how the action of individuals can be effective in founding a new self-ruling regime – despite the fact that no obvious community existed in China at that time to underwrite the novel Western practice of democratic citizenship.

In the mature democracies of northern Europe and North America, such problems are rarely discussed as theoretical issues because so many of the necessary institutions and shared practices of democracy

³ This is the definition of constitutional founding offered by Arendt, *On Revolution*, 145.

⁴ See Appendix A for detailed discussions of how I translate this and other key terms in Zhang's work.

are already there. They have existed, in Edmund Burke's words, since "time out of mind." Nothing as dramatic as founding is necessary, because peaceful, incremental changes spring satisfactorily enough from already existing or historically accessible practices and institutions. In these societies, it is easy to see political innovations as circular, as many recent political theorists have: regimes inflect the very citizens that create them, novel actions interpellate the very actors that initiate them.⁵ The same cannot be said, however, for many other parts of the world – including former European colonies whose people often express a desire for democracy, but whose governments remain unable or unwilling to implement it. Indeed, I would argue the same cannot be said for *any* instance of innovation under conditions of fragmentation, social opposition, or even widespread disbelief in its possibility. Zhang's work, then, offers a rare look at the not-so-rare problem of how we as individuals innovate politically, before a critical mass of persons has coalesced around a shared goal or developed awareness of themselves as a community capable of taking action. In the process of explaining what such innovation entails and what it can and cannot assume, Zhang's work highlights important blindspots in many accounts of political agency offered both by his peers and by contemporary political theorists. More importantly, he also offers a constructive path forward for political action that aims for the not-yet without being unduly constrained by the already existing. He suggests ways for individuals to act politically, *before* the political domains that foster such actions are conceptually present in the minds of those who constitute them.

Thinking from the early Republic: some methodological considerations on "comparative political theory"

Zhang put forward this vision for diffuse and incremental change at a time when Chinese politics was growing increasingly and intractably radical. In his influential political journal *The Tiger* (*Jiayin zazhi*), Zhang drew on his exceptional conversance with both British political theory and the Chinese intellectual tradition to defend China's nascent republican order. More importantly, he produced novel explanations

⁵ See, e.g., Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation"; Olson, "Paradoxes"; Frank, *Democracy of Distinction*.

for the theoretical and personal, as well as political, advancements required for a functional self-ruling polity. Yet Zhang's ideological dissonance with contemporary and later twentieth-century Chinese politics has made him difficult to fit into any teleology for modern Chinese intellectual history, which often focuses on explaining the rise of revolutionary communism and ignores "failed" attempts to advance moderate reform. Perhaps for this reason, much post-1949 secondary literature on modern China has neglected Zhang – yet this marked absence is belied by his central presence in earlier accounts of political thought and history.⁶

Revised projections of China's historical path are lending Zhang's thought new relevance, however. As "socialism with Chinese characteristics" replaces Maoist visions of ongoing revolution, the reform movements of the late Qing and early Republican periods (dating roughly from the mid-nineteenth century to 1919) – once seen as distracting way stations on China's march to communism – are now seen to share significant continuities with the dilemmas of the present.⁷ With this rethinking of history has come a new valuation of the role played by moderate reformers such as Zhang in China's modernization process.⁸ His calls for moderate constitutionalism, his obvious importance in influencing early twentieth-century political debate, and his skillful blending of Western and Chinese political theories has recently enjoyed a considerable revival among Sinophone scholars, especially since the publication of his ten-volume *Collected Works* (*Zhang Shizhao quanji*) in the year 2000.⁹

This book, the first extended study of Zhang Shizhao in any Western language, continues this ongoing reflection on Zhang's importance by demonstrating the relevance of his thought to both modern and contemporary debates on democracy and political action. It might seem odd to dedicate an entire book to the work of someone so unfamiliar to Anglophone audiences, but there are multiple good reasons for

⁶ Chang Naide, for example, devotes almost an entire chapter of his less than two-hundred page comprehensive overview of the entire history of Chinese thought, *Zhongguo sixiang xiao shi*, to Zhang Shizhao and *The Tiger*. See the next chapter for more discussion of Zhang's life and influence.

⁷ Wang, "Zonglun"; Karl and Zarrow, *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period*.

⁸ E.g., Huang, *Yi ge bei fangqi de xuanze*; Gao, *Tiaoshi de zhibei*, 2–6.

⁹ Bai, *Zhang Shizhao zhuan*; Guo, *Kuanrong yu tuoxie*; Zou, *Zhang Shizhao shehui zhengzhi sixiang*.

doing so besides Zhang’s obvious influence on past and contemporary Chinese thought. Most centrally, Zhang’s work is fundamentally concerned with articulating and answering fundamental questions about the nature of political life, and thus with making defensible claims that concern – in addition to the carefully argued specifics of his reform program – the causal mechanisms of social change and the relation of those mechanisms to the kind of politics he advocated. This means that he is a political theorist whose work offers insight into dilemmas common to a wide variety of societies – not only those struggling to establish permanent liberal-democratic institutions, such as in Thailand and East Timor, but also those in the contemporary West who have forgotten the challenges of this process.¹⁰ His outstanding conversance with multiple thought traditions, including classical and imperial Chinese philosophy as well as British and European thought, equips him to undertake this challenge with insight and sensitivity. Indeed, given the current focus of political and social theory on transcultural learning in an age of globalization, Zhang’s work offers unusually rich theoretical resources for negotiating this terrain.

For these reasons, the point of this book is not really to compare Zhang’s work with that of particular Western thinkers, so much as to explore and assess the questions Zhang and his interlocutors articulate. I do this by tying these questions to ongoing, sometimes millennia-old Chinese debates, such as those concerning the role of institutions in political transformation, as well as to past and present Euro-American discussions that interrogate or amplify Zhang’s conclusions, such as recent discussions about the implications for democratic politics of founding and innovation. Acutely sensitive to Roxanne Euben’s insight that all theory is grounded in some form of comparison, however, I acknowledge those implicit comparisons on which any translator of languages and ideas must draw in order to render her words and arguments meaningful. My own representation of Zhang’s arguments in English, I realize, are part of what “constitute[s] the very conditions of intelligibility across difference.”¹¹ This process of translation is at the same time a process of interpellation and transformation, leading

¹⁰ On the paradoxes of constitutional founding in Southeast Asian states that cannot presuppose liberal-democratic institutions, see Ramraj, “The Emergency Powers Paradox.”

¹¹ Euben, *Journeys*, 16.

many comparative political theorists to characterize it as a “conversation” or “dialogue” in which differently situated interlocutors address each others as equals rather than as radical “others.”¹²

Despite this obvious debt to comparative method, here and in other work I resist the construction of a “comparative” political theory. My resistance stems mainly from the tendency of comparison to preclude the development (if not the examination) of arguments and viewpoints from outside those texts and debates that have marked Euro-American discourse in political theory for the past century. Comparison tends to draw attention only to those aspects of other thought traditions that exhibit obvious resonance with Western categories, rendering non-Western ideas, thinkers, and traditions interesting as case studies but not themselves the domain of theorizing. The problem that troubles me here is not the often-noted one in which the construction of markers of difference and sameness enables a culturally imperialistic project. Much of comparative political theory takes such an insight to be a starting point, and its practitioners have already elaborated quite sophisticated theoretical models to ward off or avoid such a possibility. I am more concerned that the acknowledgment of inevitable cultural embeddedness – encouraged in the wake of Orientalist agendas that seek to exploit rather than understand the cultural “Other” – authorizes attempts at cross-cultural borrowing much less radical than they can be. Postcolonial scholars and the comparative political theorists influenced by them present Western traditions as inevitable aspects of all theorizing, in the process suppressing or ignoring the indigenous traditions of inquiry that have motivated political thinking in diverse places and times.¹³ The presumption is that although we can, through whatever model of interaction, come to understand insiders’ points of view, those of us situated on the “outside” are unable to let the foundational premises of “insiders” fully persuade us. The best we can do is recognize that and how particular arguments make sense for the insiders making them, or perhaps work toward a dialogically mediated perspective in which the mutually intelligible insights of both sides are combined. In no case can these so-called insider perspectives ever serve

¹² E.g., Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*; Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism*.

¹³ E.g., Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*. I discuss this critique in more detail in Jenco, “What Does Heaven Ever Say?”

as building blocks for a political theory along lines that draw more from “them” than from “us.”

Yet if we in American and European academic settings wish to make our thinking about politics less Eurocentric and more capable of comprehending the variety of political experiences across the globe, simply recognizing each other as equals offers few constructive guidelines; staging a unilaterally initiated “conversation” between two situated interlocutors only reinforces the very boundaries that cross-cultural research has the potential to broach so fruitfully. It seems to me that the best way to affirm the global diffusion of political theorizing is to act upon it: to develop *from* alternative traditions and *in* alternative modes new possibilities for thinking critically about politics. That way, we do not see political theory as an activity that coheres on the basis of “shared dilemmas and questions”¹⁴ – which, not surprisingly, are usually identified as those that are already articulated within the “Western canon” – but as an enterprise designed to acquire new conceptual and practical resources which can themselves prompt entirely unanticipated questions and answers. Keeping the focus on Zhang and his interlocutors, then, helps me bring to light certain contemporary Chinese debates that hold meaning for broader audiences, rather than returning always to parochial Western ones.

My attempt somewhat resembles the application to political theory of what historian Alexander Woodside calls “appropriating Occidentalism,” which encourages West-based historians to examine Western history self-reflexively through the eyes of non-Westerners, rather than only the other way around. Yet even Woodside’s call simply asks us to render the practice of history “appropriate to the study of the huge storehouse of Chinese historical experiences,”¹⁵ much as Euben suggests that we “introduce non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about living together.”¹⁶ The goal for both remains merely to craft a theory adequate to address a wider set of evidence. In contrast, my method hopes to view and select evidence through the lens of a different theory, and from there rethink the project at hand in a variety of new settings.

¹⁴ Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 10; see also Salkever and Nylan, “Comparative Political Philosophy.”

¹⁵ Woodside, “Reconciling the Chinese and Western Theory Worlds,” 121.

¹⁶ Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 9.

Obviously, any reader brings her own prejudices to the texts she analyzes, and my reading of Zhang's work is undoubtedly influenced by personal experience. But claiming that such prejudices inhibit a successful reconstruction of the arguments Zhang put forward is to court a strange double standard about the capacity of political theorists to learn anything from the texts they study. That is, the ability of political theorists to draw out compelling arguments from historically situated canonical texts remains – pace Quentin Skinner – a contested but often utilized conclusion of the subfield. That Zhang is Chinese and I am not has little to do with my own ability to extract from his work sophisticated theoretical arguments, given adequate grounding in the language and discourse of that time and place.¹⁷ It may be possible to formulate an argument that cultural versus historical differences demand alternative modes of engagement, but until that time I will press forward on the assumption that, given proper training, the political thinking of early Republican China is as accessible to me as is that of any other time and place, whether ancient Athens or Florentine Italy.

In any case, the interpretive insights to be gained by reading Zhang as an agent of theory and not simply of history are considerable enough to broach such risks. While historians have exhaustively documented the intellectual debates of the Republican era, they rarely consider the simple fact that these thinkers were, in Chang Hao's words, “speaking both to the historical and to the existential situations.”¹⁸ Seeing them only as historical actors cannot adequately comprehend the nature of persistent dilemmas that confronted them on the level of theory. In fact, taking Zhang seriously as a theoretical, and not merely historical, agent allows me to analyze in a deeper way than otherwise possible the major issues that continue to animate modern Chinese political thought and practice – including the relationship of intellectuals to the masses, the role of government in social transformation, and the articulation of political action and authority in a post-dynastic Confucian system.

¹⁷ What constitutes “adequate” grounding is, of course, a point of debate, but this remains as true for the interpretation of canonical Western texts as it does for interpretation across perceived cultural boundaries. My point is simply that if we accept the possibility of such historical reconstruction given temporal distance, we should have no problem accepting the possibility of cultural reconstruction given spatial distance. I am indebted to Mark Bevir for clarifying this similarity for me.

¹⁸ Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, 8.

In this book, I therefore begin – though I do not end – with a set of theoretical problems articulated by Zhang and his fellow intellectuals in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China, insisting always that their concerns reach beyond their immediate historical and cultural contexts even as their and my arguments draw important resources from them. In other words, I do not wish to contribute to Western debates by critiquing them from “the outside,” so much as to sustain an argument from Chinese thought, with implications for contemporary Chinese as much as Western concerns.

Founding and paradox

Zhang was not the only person in China at the time to realize that community creation was the first order of business for any successful reform, but he was among the few to recognize the close relationship of self-aware communities with specifically political institutions. Political education – not only for the largely illiterate Chinese masses but also for the educated elites who equally lacked any real experience of governing democratically – was a primary concern of most reformers in the years following the Qing deposal in 1911. Liang Qichao (1873–1929), one of the most influential intellectuals and social activists in modern China, advocated mass education campaigns. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), leader of the revolutionary forces that toppled the Qing dynasty, demanded political tutelage under party leadership. Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), elected president of the newly declared Republic, recommended (and after only a short term in office, attempted to install) benevolent dictatorship.

Zhang dismissed these proposed solutions as not only elitist, and therefore threats to both the practice and foundation of democracy, but also ineffective. After spending the early years of his public career promoting liberal institutions – like constitutions, parliaments, and civil liberties – that persistently failed to materialize, Zhang came to identify the problem of founding as a problem of the right people: “As I see it, making the political lies in people; those people exist and the political flourishes” (ZQJ 5). Although here Zhang uses the word for “persons” (*ren*) rather than for “the people” in the sense of masses (*min* or *pingmin*), he does not expect elites alone to do this work – even if, by writing in classical rather than vernacular Chinese, they were the audience he primarily addressed. To Zhang, political