

Joseph Needham's Review of *Oriental Despotism*

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{p. 58} Book Reviews

Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power, by K. A. Wittfogel – New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957. \$7.50. Pp xx, 556 with tables, index and bibliography; no illustrations, no Chinese characters.

For twenty years and more the learned world has been waiting for the promised study of societies and civilizations, based upon the view that some of them were powerfully conditioned by their early specialization on hydraulic engineering works. This is a theme of great interest to all who are concerned with the history of culture and thought as a whole. Professor Wittfogel's former book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas* (Leipzig, 1931) was and will always remain a fine and stimulating study – its Marxism was chiefly an emphasis on social and economic factors in Chinese history which had been overlooked by others. We have long been promised an extension of this investigation to cover many other cultures besides the Chinese. It would, we believed, reveal the extent to which hydraulic engineering works and the special kind of bureaucratic society to which they gave rise were characteristic of certain human cultures and not of others. Unfortunately, instead of a mature and deeply-thought out contribution to scholarship, we now find in our hands a political tract which later generations will only be able to understand in the context of the "cold war" period. During the course of the gestation of this work, a significant change occurred in its title. The author himself tells us (page 8) that the name which he originally intended for the book was "Oriental Society". That he changed it to "Oriental Despotism," with all that that implies, may be considered by later ages as one of the most unfortunate intellectual casualties in the "cold war".

Briefly, the formula upon which this book is constructed runs somewhat as follows. First, the author accepts from the classical economists and from Marx their original conception of a special "hydraulic Asiatic" mode of production, often called Asiatic bureaucratism, as a characteristic {p. 59} and individual form of society of independent status parallel with feudalism or capitalism. All later modifications of this idea, such as the more developed view accepted by many Asian historians themselves, the conception of bureaucratic feudalism, are entirely neglected. Secondly, Professor Wittfogel proceeds to derive from this type of society, and indeed to read back into it, all the faults of modern "totalitarian" State power, irrespective of the professed purpose and orientation of the different varieties of the latter. Then thirdly, attacking these in the unmeasured language of the political pamphleteer, he finds himself forced to denigrate the mediaeval hydraulic

bureaucratic society of certain cultures, especially the Chinese, as the source of all the evils of modern authoritarian States. This attempt to reveal the fountain and origin of some of the more hateful features of contemporary society both in East and West thus leads to a one-sided view of mediaeval Chinese society, and indeed the book may be said to constitute the greatest disservice which has yet been done to the objective study of the history of China.

One may, of course, fully agree about the importance of hydraulic engineering for certain societies of the feudal bureaucratic type. This is indeed historically certain, and Professor Wittfogel is assuredly not wrong in finding wide-spread traces of this type of society in ancient Egypt, ancient Mesopotamia, India and some of the Amerindian cultures such as that of the Incas. Many students of Chinese history will be ready to agree with him when he says, for example (page 47), that the "hydraulic rulers were sufficiently strong to do on a national scale, what the feudal lords could accomplish only within the boundaries of their domains," compelling "able-bodied commoners to work through the agency of the corvée." Again (page 49), it will very probably turn out to be true that the hydraulic state prevented the non-governmental forces of society from crystallizing into independent bodies strong enough to counterbalance or even control the political machine. This is quite all right up to a point, but it must be admitted that there are a number of serious exceptions to this rule if it is meant to be a universal generalization. For example, in ancient Ceylon works of water-conservation and irrigation were carried out on such a scale as to make the Sinhalese comparable with the Chinese. Yet we do not find in the history of Ceylon much trace of bureaucratic organization. Perhaps for this reason one looks for Ceylon in the index of Professor Wittfogel's book in vain.

In an elaborate argument (pages 369 f.) Professor Wittfogel paradoxically turns the tables on the Marxists of the present day by demonstrating that they are not following all the conceptions of Karl Marx himself.

{p. 60} The theory of "Asiatic bureaucratism," which was really developed at a time when Sinology was in its infancy and extremely little was known about Chinese history, is accepted by Professor Wittfogel as an article of sacred doctrine, with regard to which he considers the Marxists of the present day as, to say the least, heretics or backsliders. For indeed they have in recent times gone over to the other opinion, of course often dogmatically held, that all forms of human society developed through the same recognizable stages: primitive collectivism being followed by societies based on slave labor, and this in turn by feudal societies and finally by capitalist forms of organization. This is presumably what Professor Wittfogel means when he says, in his ungracious jargon, that they "peddle the unilinear construct" (page 7). While the best course in these matters is no doubt to await slow accumulation of fundamental research findings on these problems, Professor Wittfogel is a determined upholder of the original conception of Asiatic bureaucratism. His treatment of the Marxists of the present day seems a brilliant tour de force, but depends, however, on the naive assumption that doctrines are

incapable of undergoing development. Moreover, it was inevitable that this one should change in course of time, since the knowledge of China which Europeans possessed when it was formulated was comparatively small. Furthermore, one finishes his chapter on this subject (page 412) with a feeling of great astonishment that he has developed the whole argument without the slightest attempt to analyse the debates about the question among modern Chinese scholars and historians.

With regard to the second element in Professor Wittfogel's formula, it is striking that he makes very little distinction between political power as such and the evils which may now flow from it on the one hand, and the "totalitarian" power on the other. Only Communism is attacked; no mention is made of the Nazi persecution of the Jews or of the concentration camps of Kenya and Cyprus. No reference occurs to the treatment of the Negroes in America, or to the events which we have witnessed in our own time in Spain, Portugal or South Africa. With such a bias any reader is driven to question the sincerity of the expressions of sympathy, sometimes moving enough, which are devoted to the lot of those who have fallen foul of the regimes under which they happened to live. Occasionally the author admits this point. For example, he says (page 77), "to be sure, violence and plunder are not the monopoly of any society"; or again, on page 139, we read "to be sure, all governments deserving of the name have ways of imposing their will on their subjects and the use of violence is always among them." But

{p. 61} these admissions are not allowed to affect the main direction of Professor Wittfogel's fire. He makes our flesh creep by describing at length the Indian Machievellianism of the *Artasastra* (though he seems unable to produce any equivalent book from Chinese literature), while making no mention of the Secret Council at Venice or the Holy Office at Rome – or indeed Machiavelli himself and all that is implied by him of European city-state society.

Side by side with this curious partiality there goes a quite bizarre judgment on less political matters. For example, the author has something to say about the characteristic styles of architecture in different societies. Regarding buildings, he alleges that the architectural style of bureaucratic hydraulic society was always essentially monumental. Yet in this case, what is to be said of the existence of the many great stone-built temples in Greek and Roman civilization, of the Acropolis at Athens and of the castles and enormous cathedrals of the European Middle Ages? It seems a *reductio ad absurdum* to read in this book that the cathedrals are to be explained by a "quasi-hydraulic pattern of organization and acquisition pervading the Latin Church" (page 45). Many of Professor Wittfogel's readers who are acquainted with the architecture both of Europe and of China will feel that the horizontal wooden buildings, whether temples or palaces, of China have much more humility and humanism, even when carried out on an imperial scale, than the counterpart architecture of stone so often massive, even cyclopean, in non-hydraulic Europe. When reading sections of this kind, one feels that Professor

Wittfogel has lost all touch with reality and has taken up his abode in a realm of schematic analogies which no facts would ever be allowed to modify.

We may now turn, in connection with the third aspect of his formula, to Professor Wittfogel's systematic attempt to blacken the age-old, mandarin, the civil service of traditional China. It may be predicted that Sinologists in all countries will feel that he has given a quite distorted picture of their mode of existence. No doubt there were many, inefficient, even some wicked, administrators of the bureaucratic feudalism of China, but nevertheless the successive emperors were served in all ages by a great company or profoundly humane and disinterested scholars. To maintain the opposite is to deny verifiable historical facts. It is indeed very dubious whether the term "despotism" is a suitable word at all for the traditional Chinese imperial rule. The word is taken, of course, from Quesnay who admired what he thought China was like, precisely from the standpoint of 18th-century European absolutism. But in fact there was most undoubtedly in mediaeval China a public opinion {p. 62}. It was not the public opinion of a universally educated population, but it was that of the educated scholar-gentry, whose interests were by no means always identical with those of the emperor.

In certain periods, the moral authority of the Confucian bureaucrats could be backed up by memorials addressed to the emperor about celestial portents. These portents could even be used by different groups within the mandarin. The civil service as a whole possessed a very great power of obstruction. One of the most striking features in the recent book of Professor C. P. Fitzgerald about the T'ang empress, Wu Tse T'ien is the demonstration of the way in which the civil service would not budge on matters which went against traditionally accepted values. Another recent author, Dr. J. T. C. Liu, has shown that although ultimate power lay with the imperial family, the Confucian scholars never lost their independent ideological authority, and in the final analysis were more important than the emperor for they did not necessarily depend upon the government for a living, while the dynasty had to accept their services in order to exist. Not a few times in Chinese history an inept emperor lost his throne, and the scholar bureaucrats were certainly not the only elements in the State power who were in danger of coming to grief.

Persuasion was always the most commonly used means in politics under various forms of government, and there was a particularly long and deeply-rooted tradition of it in China. It amounted to effective political pressure, and sometimes the idealists completely won over an emperor to their cause for the whole of his reign. The history of the civil service in China is studded with magnificent examples of men of worth, whether poets such as Tu Fu or Su Tung-Pho, scientific men like Li Shun-Feng, Shen Kua and Su Sung, even Buddhist clergy like I-Hsing. There is no need to labor the point, because anyone with Professor Wittfogel's knowledge of Chinese history would have given every emphasis to it if he had not been led away by a doctrinaire theory to do a great injustice to these figures of history who should be better known to the Western World than they are.

In this connection it is extraordinary to find no mention of the institution of the censorate (Yii-Shih) in Professor Wittfogel's book. This organization, which was one of the mechanisms of the Confucian state, looked after the supervision of the provincial officials at all levels, and reported to the imperial court on any infractions of the code of morals and administration. The only censorship of which we find any mention in the book is the censorship of mail (page 56), which does not concern Chinese culture and has nothing to do with the case. Lastly

{p. 63} one cannot but make a reference to the ancient right of rebellion, so characteristic a doctrine of the Confucian scholars from the time of Mencius onwards. It was enunciated by the scholars of the Chou dynasty, some 2000 years before Bishop Ponnet formulated his doctrine of the "right of rebellion against un-Christian princes." It was only one more element in that democratic duality of life in traditional China which has been experienced by all those who have known Chinese society at first hand. There are so many evidences of it – the austerity of life of the best Confucian officials, the exceptional moral stature of farmers and of old people generally, the comparative absence of special modes of address as between superiors and inferiors which we find in other Far Eastern civilizations, and the familiar though highly respectful way (perhaps deriving from the practices of the Great Family) with which even the greatest men are treated by their subordinates.

Mention of rebellions reminds one of what might be regarded as perhaps the most extraordinary of all Professor Wittfogel's distortions. He tells us that "the history of hydraulic society suggests that the class struggle, far from being a chronic disease of all mankind, is the luxury of multi-centered and open societies" (p. 329). Yet his whole discussion of internal troubles and rebellions is conducted without a single reference to the great and well-known movements in Chinese history – the "Yellow Turbans," the "Red Eyebrows," the "White Lotus" sect, etc., etc., all through the ages, corresponding to the peasant revolts in Europe. It is impossible to understand how they could be ignored as they are here. None of them, not even the "Boxers," are in the index. Nor is there any reference to the role of Buddhism and Taoism in relation to them. Indeed the current researches of Chinese historians are bringing to light details of many more of these peasant rebellions than have been well understood in the past.

It is to be feared that this omission is only one of many which will appear to Sinologists to disqualify the book as an authentic and reliable account of Chinese civilization. For example, Professor Wittfogel admits (pages 322 f.) that slavery was never dominant in China, but glosses over the great significance of this in the interests of his perpetual attacks on bureaucratism. He deals in passing with the private ownership of land in China (page 290), but this is really incompatible with the extreme form in which Professor Wittfogel states the thesis of hydraulic bureaucratism. Again he goes beyond all bounds when he attempts to maintain that "hydraulism" was already a characteristic of the most ancient times before the Shang period as well as of the Shang and the Chou. Elsewhere (pp. 88, 114), he tells us that

large and influential priesthoods {p. 64} invariably characterise hydraulic civilization – yet this makes nonsense for China, the country of all countries where no priesthood ever dominated. In other parts of the book, the examination system is played down and the eunuchs (as the shock-troops of bureaucracy) are played up. Thus many features of the book will rouse the objections of Sinologists, and indeed it is hard to believe that Professor Wittfogel has really made use of the wide knowledge with which his long career in Sinological sociology must surely have endowed him. In these circumstances the value of his long disquisitions on other civilizations (Maya, Inca, Roman, African, Hawaiian), with which he must necessarily have less first-hand acquaintance, becomes questionable.

Perhaps the fundamental fallacy of the whole book is the treatment of anything before 1600 A.D. as just the same as it was afterwards. For it was at that time that something qualitatively new came into the world – modern Natural Science. As the result of it, both capitalist and socialist societies today are in a qualitatively different situation from all preceding societies. One simply cannot consider the feudal bureaucratism of the Middle Ages in the same breath as modern State power of any kind whatsoever. If science has given mankind the possibility of universal self-destruction, it has also given the possibility of unheard-of well-being for the whole human race, and in particular the radical humanization of bureaucratic structures. The humanization of bureaucracy is probably the greatest problem confronting modern civilization, and it presents itself as absolutely vital on both sides of the so-called "iron curtain." The fundamental nonsense of Professor Wittfogel's strictures on bureaucratism is that a high degree of bureaucratic government seems quite inevitable given the technological complexities of modern society. At the same time, modern science has provided a thousand technical helps which could eventually, and one must believe will eventually, make it work. These are as yet very imperfectly used – telephones, portable radio-communications, automatic card-filing and sorting systems, calculating machines, photographic documentary reproduction – all these and many more are available. Nothing is lacking except good-will. Good-will is the commitment to treating ordinary people with sympathy and understanding, and the realization that no expenditure on equipment is wasted which sets forward this aim. This is perhaps the promised peace on earth, and whoever puts first the real needs of real people will inherit it.

I would have no hesitation in pursuing the argument precisely in the opposite direction to Professor Wittfogel, for I genuinely believe that good government, as it was understood in the Chinese Middle Ages, may {p. 65} have much to teach us about the organization of bureaucratic government in the future. The civilization which Professor Wittfogel is so bitterly attacking was one which could make poets and scholars into officials. The civilization which Professor Wittfogel defends is one in which it would have been utterly impossible for William Blake, or Giordano Bruno, or Michael Faraday to have been given such a charge. In other words, far from seeing in traditional Chinese bureaucratism the root of all evil, I believe that

the Chinese may yet have a great task to perform in the teaching of the rest of the world, drawing as they can on their bureaucratic experience of more than 2000 years. There may yet be great virtue in Confucian traditions, as there was in the 18th century when the translations of the Chinese Classics into Latin revealed to an astonished world the existence of a morality without supernaturalism and of a great continuing culture which has emphatically not been based upon the pessimistic doctrine of original sin.

Although *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Chinas* had a perspicacious section on the factors in Chinese culture which inhibited the rise of Natural Science there, science is not now in Professor Wittfogel's vocabulary – or at any rate not in his index. Only on page 29 is the value of astronomy for the calendar of hydraulic agrarian civilization very briefly referred to. Thus blinded, it seems, by psychological fear, (cf. such phrases as "total terror," "total loneliness," etc.), our author ignores one of the most important features of the two millennia of Chinese history. For down to about A.D. 1450, and with the exception of certain Greek and Hellenistic periods, Chinese science and technology was well ahead of European; only at the Renaissance and after 1600 did modern science come into the world and confer upon European {sic} an adventitious (and as we now see, transient) dominance. Since scientific discovery and technological invention are justly regarded as requiring a considerable measure of personal freedom, it remains perfectly inexplicable, if Professor Wittfogel's picture of China were to be adopted, how this lead could ever have come about or been maintained. Nor does he make any sign of facing this problem. On the contrary, he avers (page 420) that "hydraulic society is the outstanding case of societal stagnation." Clearly we have here to do not with scientific investigation but with politically-oriented fact-defying dogma. One can only regret that so much talent should have been devoted to elaborating it.

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