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Portraits of Integrity

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Huang Zongxi: Making it safe not to be servile

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Abstract: Integrity is often conceived as a heroic ideal: the person of integrity sticks to what they believe is right, regardless of the consequences. In this article, I defend a conception of ordinary integrity, for people who either do not desire or are unable to be moral martyrs. Drawing on the writings of seventeenth century thinker Huang Zongxi, I propose refocussing attention away from an abstract ideal of integrity, to instead consider the institutional conditions whereby it is made safe not to be servile.

We revel in the stories of moral heroes, stories of people who hold strong in their commitment to what they see to be right, regardless the pressure on them to yield. They are moral saints, or even moral martyrs: for them, 'virtue is its own reward', above any other possible reward and against any possible penalty. But the moral good feelings from such stories quickly convert into outrage and anger when we contrast these moral heroes with the more common failures of integrity that we witness in everyday life. Nor is there a clear solution to the familiar everyday failures

of integrity: if the essence of integrity is moral heroism, all we can do is vainly hope that more people might come to be more morally inspired.

The 17th century political theorist Huang Zongxi (1610-1695) thought we could do better than wish earnestly for more moral saints and martyrs. He presents to us a portrait of a different sort of integrity, something more commonplace and reasonable to expect ordinary people to live up to. In his essay *Waiting for the Dawn: Advice for a Prince*, Huang invites us to think more broadly about institutional conditions which *make it safe* for ordinary people, who are not moral saints and who do not want to be moral martyrs, to act with integrity. Perhaps there is a joy in acting with integrity, and for everyone virtue is its own reward, at least to some small degree. But the problem is that often there are contrary incentives that outweigh that reward. Any optimism regarding human nature needs to be supported by a clear-eyed view of the various other desires and fears that weigh upon ordinary individuals as they make decisions in their lives. In particular, Huang shows us there needs to be attention to the drivers of *servility*: to the desires and fears that lead individuals to pander to the will of the powerful. A portrait of ordinary integrity will be one that is framed by a broader picture of a political ecology which allows servility to be overcome and integrity to shine through.

The dying days of the Ming Dynasty form the backdrop for Huang's impatience with non-institutional approaches to integrity. In theory and in ideal, Ming Dynasty China (1368-1644) was ruled by an Emperor, supported by an imperial court. The court comprised the ministers and other officials of the civil service. All members of the imperial civil service were Confucian scholars, whose knowledge of the classics would enable them to facilitate governance in accord with the Confucian Way of virtue. In practice, however, Emperors resented any constraint that the

imperial civil service brought to bear on their ambitions and desires. They centralised Imperial power, and sought to achieve a docile and compliant civil service; suspicious of roles that might limit or compete with Imperial power, they eliminated the post of prime minister.¹

The case of Scholar Fang (1357-1402), perhaps the most famous Confucian martyr in Chinese history, would have offered Huang an example of heroic integrity. The Yongle Emperor (1360-1424), an early Ming emperor, wanted the great Confucian scholar, Scholar Fang, to assist him by drafting imperial ordinances. The Yongle Emperor had in fact illegitimately usurped the throne; Fang did not approve and therefore he thought it was inappropriate to cooperate. Scholar Fang arrived to the court in mourning clothes, and declared that he preferred death to assisting the new Emperor. The Emperor was not prepared to tolerate this ostentatious display of virtue. He promised to deny Fang's wish: if Fang continued not to assist him, he would not satisfy Fang's desire for death, but instead he would kill his 'nine families'. The killing of nine degrees of kinship was the most serious punishment in ancient China, but Fang was undeterred. Refusing to back down, he invited the Emperor to kill his ten families, and then continued to defy the Emperor's command. He wrote just one sentence for the Emperor—'The Bastard Prince Di of Yan usurped the throne'—on a piece of paper that he threw back in the Emperor's face. Even as the Emperor gathered together Fang's nine families, Fang continued to reprimand the Emperor. To silence Fang's insolence, the Emperor ordered that Fang's tongue and cheeks be cut off. Fang, unable to talk, spurted blood on him. The Emperor dismembered Scholar Fang's body and killed his nine families, as well as his friends and disciples, a total of 873 people. (Low et al, *A General History of China*, 42-43) In the face of this exemplar of heroic integrity, far from being inspired to virtue, many scholar-officials

were cowed into submission, as of course was the Emperor's intention. If Fang's case teaches the cost of not being servile, small wonder if decent upstanding people choose servility instead.

Bloody though he was, at least the Yongle Emperor was effective. Subsequent Ming emperors combined a similar hostility to criticism with a sybaritic lifestyle of luxury and concubines, allowing for the rise of the eunuchs as a political force. Eunuchs were a long-standing part of Chinese imperial rule. They were responsible for the imperial household and the Emperor's personal needs; they could be put in charge of the Emperor's harem without the Emperor facing any risk of becoming a cuckold. Their intimacy with the Emperor allowed them to pander to his whims. In return for this, favoured eunuchs were increasingly entrusted with carrying out his political business, thus sidelining and subverting the civil service.

Between the submissive civil service and the pandering of the eunuchs, there was little check on Imperial power within the Imperial court. Traditional Confucianism proposed a model of politics in which virtue naturally rules. In Confucius's words, 'One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars'. (*Kongzi*, 2.1) Or again:

'If you desire goodness, then the common people will be good. The Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend.' (*Kongzi*, 12.9)

A good ruler learns virtue by reflecting upon the examples of the sage-Kings of the Confucian ancient golden age; his subjects gladly obey. But where does this leave upstanding subjects whose emperor is indifferent to virtue? In the late Ming period, a group of scholars formed the Donglin academy, an oppositional force characterised by its rigorous adherence to Confucian precepts of virtue, even at great personal cost.

The Donglin academy found many sympathisers within the Imperial civil service: all civil servants, after all, were trained in the Confucian classics. The late Ming period became riven by conflict between the Donglin faction and the eunuchs, and amidst this conflict the governance of the country was neglected and misdirected, and famine fell upon the land. The peasants rose up (1628-1644), the Ming Dynasty collapsed, and Manchurian invaders from the north inaugurated a new dynasty, the Qing (1644-1912).

Huang Zongxi was born in the final decades of the Ming Dynasty, and received a good Confucian education. But what could he make of the traditional Confucian idea of the people naturally bowing to the gentle influence of virtue? His own father was a virtuous Confucian scholar-official in the Donglin faction, but in reward for his noble efforts, he was murdered by a eunuch. Beyond this intense familial experience of a corrupt political system, Huang was also in other respects uniquely well placed to analyse politics. His personal circumstances freed him to be acutely critical of all contemporary political powers. Despite all the Ming dynasty's flaws, Huang was a loyalist, fighting in guerilla resistance against the Qing for more than a decade until all hope of a Ming restoration was lost. He did not need to please the Qing, because as a loyalist, he could never hold office in the Qing regime. But the Ming dynasty had collapsed, so it too was fair game for criticism: what were the causes of its fall? His reflections on this topic are compiled in his best-known work, *Waiting for the Dawn*.

Waiting for the Dawn proposes a fundamental and intuitively appealing criterion for good politics, expressed through an analogy with the relationship between master and tenant. A tenant works for the benefit of the master. Applying this to the political relationship between the prince (emperor) and all-under-heaven

(the populace), Huang contrasts the golden age of virtuous Confucian kings with the present:

In ancient times, all-under-Heaven were considered the master, and the prince was the tenant. The prince spent his whole life working for all-under Heaven. Now the prince is master, and all-under-Heaven are tenants. (*Waiting*, 92)

In other words, good politics serves the common benefit, whereas bad and corrupted politics serves the personal interest of the ruler. Whereas generations of Confucians had exhorted subjects to be uphold the virtues of obedience, deference and filiality, even to the worst ruler, Huang boldly embraces the revolutionary possibilities of distinguishing between good and bad politics. He explicitly endorses a famous passage of the classic text the *Mengzi*, which was often suppressed in his time (*Waiting*, 92-93): if a ruler is a tyrant, then he fails truly to be a ruler. He has become nothing better than a 'mutilator and a thief' (*Mengzi*, 1B8), and correspondingly deserves punishment, including execution.

But Huang is under no illusions that this willingness to distinguish tyranny from proper rule, and willingness to punish it accordingly, amounts to a sufficient theory of good politics. The benefit of all-under-heaven does not take care of itself: when a bad form of politics is removed, then the task of establishing a good form still faces us. Nor is this straightforward: ruling well is hard, exhausting work for the prince, and contrary to all humans' natural inclination to ease and pleasure (*Waiting*, 91-92). The critical question will be, how to bring about good rule?

Huang's answer begins with a detour: let us start by considering what a good minister should do. '[W]hen one goes forth to serve, it is for all-under-Heaven and not for the prince' (*Waiting*, 94). This follows from our fundamental criterion of good politics: even though a minister works for the prince, his² activities should not serve the prince's desires.

When one acts for the sake of all-under-Heaven and its people, then one cannot agree to do anything contrary to the Way even if the prince explicitly constrains one to do so. (*Waiting*, 94)

To put this in other words, a good minister should act with *integrity*. Notice a striking feature of Huang's analysis: the main threat to integrity is not self-interest. Self-interest may be a problem, but Huang is primarily concerned to combat a slightly different phenomenon, namely, *servility*. The exemplar of servility is a house-servant. Such a servant does not act for their own interest. But neither do they even act for their master's interest. Instead, they act to satisfy whatever wish or desire their master has; indeed, a good house-servant seeks to satisfy the desires even before the master has articulated them. Crucially, they do not pass judgement on these desires. Servility is this total submission to the master's whim. Huang allows that servility has its place in the domestic sphere, but it is fatal to politics:

To act solely for the prince and his dynasty, and attempt to anticipate the prince's unexpressed whims or cravings—this is to have the mind of a eunuch or a palace maid. (*Waiting*, 95, see also 166)

The solution to bad political orders is to have ministers, most especially Prime Ministers, who are not servile. When ministers act with integrity rather than servility, then they pass judgement on the prince's desires and judgements. They place virtuous pressure on the ego of the prince, bringing his decisions back in line with the Way, and thereby benefiting all-under-Heaven.

This solution to the problem of securing a good political order may appear to be no solution at all. Certainly, if ministers act with integrity, then the prince is somewhat constrained to rule in accordance with the Way. But recall our starting point was the problem that princes are sometimes tempted not to exert themselves with virtue. How much more of a problem it is for ministers! Remember what happened to Scholar Fang: if integrity comes at cost of such spectacular martyrdom,

we can predict that there will be few ministers of integrity. Nor is it clear that integrity is even particularly efficacious in the end. Think of Huang's own father and the other leaders of the Donglin faction: their virtuous remonstrances were certainly irritating for the imperial court so long as they lasted, but ultimately they were crushed. The lesson for future ministers was clear, even for those of virtuous disposition: the only safe route is servility. And perhaps this is also the route of efficacy: hopefully you can make some small positive contributions to good rule within the confines of your servile role, and these positive contributions amount to something, in contrast to the utter futility of heroic martyrdom. Surely this is the best way to serve all-under-heaven, given the circumstances.

The cautious counsel of virtuous servility may be prudent and necessary, but it amounts to entirely abandoning integrity as a real political value. And this is not something that Huang is prepared to do. Could there be a different way to think about integrity? Huang wonders, what if it were possible to *make it safe not to be servile*? After all, Huang is a Confucian who is confident that there is some inner reward and satisfaction for us when we act virtuously; if only the harsh incentives against integrity can be lessened, then we can have integrity as an everyday realisable moral value. We can realistically call for ordinary integrity to characterise the conduct of ministers.

The key to Huang's proposal is the institutionalisation of integrity: we need established practices which protect and guard the space for individual political actors to behave with integrity. These practices cover a full gamut of political forms. There are ritual practices in which political actors regularly symbolically perform and display respect:

In ancient times the prince treated his ministers with such courtesy that when a minister bowed to the emperor, the emperor always bowed in return. (Waiting, 94) There are laws which serve the public interest and therefore do not force officials into a hard choice between the Confucian Way of virtue and the prince's will (*Waiting*, 97-99). And there are institutional schedules and patterns of interaction which require the prince to expose himself to the criticism of ministers and scholars: every day, he hears presentations and submissions from his ministers, according to the agenda that they decide; once a month, he visits the Imperial College in the status of a student, listening in deference to the judgement of the most eminent scholars (*Waiting*, 103, 107). All of these dissipate a power that would otherwise be centralised on the prince's unfettered will.

In Huang's view, for most of us, whether prince, minister, or ordinary citizen, virtue is not a free-floating possibility, unrelated to the institutional structure in which we live. But we can have insight into the kind of conditions which will support our virtue. In particular, we might hope that a reasonable prince could be persuaded of the need to establish an institutional system which curbs his whim and desire, and which subjects his judgement to scrutiny. Central to this system is the protection of space for all other political actors to be non-servile, without facing martyrdom for doing so. And within this space, these other actors will rise to the occasion, enjoying the inherent satisfaction of acting with integrity.

The optimism of this proposal might appear not to be supported by the historical record. How would Huang's optimism explain the Ming emperors' consistently striving to establish a system of centralised power supported by eunuchs and servile ministers? Why did these emperors not maintain the model of the Confucian golden age, where the prince deferred to the virtuous judgement of ministers and scholars? It was not for want of scholars explaining to them that they

should! Huang provides a sharp diagnosis of the temptations of servility, both for master and slave.

[W]henver ministers of state opposed the emperor's misguided desires, the eunuchs would say, '... How can they be so disrespectful?' ... So [the emperor] said '... It seems as if the household ministers really love me, while the state ministers only love themselves!' Thereupon, those who served as ministers took this as an indication of what pleased the emperor and what displeased him. As a result, they abandoned the true way of teacher and friend, hastening to adopt the manners and appearance of slaves. (*Waiting*, 166)

If the prince is so absorbed in his own desires that he is unable to recognise the possibility that his desires and judgements are misguided, then he will not permit the development of a political order in which ministers are safe not to be servile. This narcissism always remains a possibility and a temptation for a ruler. In a bad political order that is organised to support rulerly narcissism, subjects face an unsatisfactory choice between heroic integrity and servility. Under such conditions, servility becomes a reasonable path: well-intentioned individuals are reduced to making occasional small positive contributions within their servile roles, where it does not directly conflict with rulerly intentions. But a good political system eliminates this constraint, and makes space for us all to cultivate our ordinary integrity.

Further Readings

Chan, Elton (2018), 'Huang Zongxi as a republican: A theory of governance for Confucian democracy', *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 17 (2).

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- The *Mengzi* and the *Kongzi*, both in Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden (eds.), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett)
- Low, C. C. et al (1995), *A General History of China, Vol. 7: Ming Dynasty* (Singapore: Canfonian Pte Ltd).
- Twitchett, Dennis C., and Mote, Frederick W. (2008), *The Cambridge History of China, Volumes 7 & 8: The Ming Dynasty, Parts I & II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

¹ C. C. Low et al (1995), *A General History of China, Vol. 7: Ming Dynasty* (Singapore: Canfonian Pte Ltd), 20-22. In what follows, I provide a rough caricature history of the period, with the purpose of supporting Huang's own analysis of politics. For a history of the period meeting proper scholarly standards, see Dennis C. Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (2008), *The Cambridge History of China, Volumes 7 & 8: The Ming Dynasty, Parts I & II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

² There was no possibility women holding political office in this period.