

BOOK REVIEWS

What Is Enlightenment: Can China Answer Kant's Question? By Wei Zhang. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. x, 121 Pp. Hardback, ISBN 9781438431055. Paperback, 9781438431062.)

Wei Zhang's *What Is Enlightenment: Can China Answer Kant's Question?* is a short but significant study addressing the question of enlightenment in the West and China. Given the continuing Eurocentrism of most Western philosophy and discourses about enlightenment, this is a valuable work that powerfully—if imperfectly—demonstrates how enlightenment can no longer be conceptualized as an exclusively Western phenomenon. According to Zhang, enlightenment is more appropriately conceived as global and intercultural with a multiplicity of cultural social-political matrices revealing its varying local possibilities and boundaries. Not only have Western philosophers debated the significance of enlightenment, non-Western intellectuals and activists have considered the meaning and implications of enlightenment in their own contexts. Despite colonialism and Western-oriented modernization, these local contexts and events cannot be reduced to the raw material for or passive products of Western agency, and thus need to become part of a more adequate conception of enlightenment.

In 1784, Immanuel Kant defined enlightenment in his article “What Is Enlightenment?” as a process of “emergence” out of “self-imposed immaturity.”¹ As this immaturity is self-imposed, the self can begin to make the transition from the heteronomy of subservience to others to the autonomy of rational self-legislation. But, as Zhang illustrates, this movement results in the paradoxical simultaneous assertion of public freedom and private obedience in Kant's text: “Argue as much as you want and about what you want, but obey!”² The enlightened ruler does not fear the free public use of reason because he “likewise has a well-disciplined, numerous army to guarantee public peace.”³ Zhang traces how this aporia of freedom and power, of autonomy and heteronomy, has driven the dynamics of and possibilities for enlightenment in both the European and Chinese contexts.

The aporia of freedom and obedience is already present in its own way in what Zhang describes as the Confucian enlightenment tradition—rediscovered in relation to the European Enlightenment as

an alternative to it—which calls for a responsible freedom compatible with Kant's, that is, individual self-cultivation, a fairer social order, and moral obligation frequently interpreted as social obedience. Zhang surprisingly does not further pursue the question of Kant and China, particularly issues that compromise the cosmopolitanism and universalism of his practical philosophy such as the intersection in his thought between enlightenment, colonialism, and a new biological conception of race or his problematic response to Confucian thought and Chinese culture.⁴

The difference between Western and non-Western modernity is marked by the constant belatedness of the latter, the inability to share the same temporality with the West. In the Chinese context, it is difficult not to notice how Chinese forms of thought have been shaped by but also shaped the Chinese reception of and response to the West. This is particularly true of enlightenment, as Chinese intellectuals pursued questions such as whether there can be a Chinese enlightenment, a Chinese modernity, and what this might consist of in the context of being informed by and presupposing—in renewing or even in radically opposing—traditional Chinese and particularly Confucian ideas and practices.

The European Enlightenment's ambiguous legacy is a troublesome question for contemporary Western thinkers discussed by Zhang, such as Habermas, Foucault, and Rorty. It is in many ways a more dramatic one for Chinese intellectuals who wish to realize the ideas and practices of the Enlightenment without their Western conditions. In Zhang's assessment, the difference in conditions led Vera Schwarcz in *The Chinese Enlightenment* to emphasize the incommensurability of the Enlightenment in the West and China and—in a certain sense—the impossibility of enlightenment in China.⁵ Whereas the European Enlightenment was primarily cultural and philosophical, the Chinese attempt at enlightenment represented by the May Fourth Movement of 1919, and the intellectuals associated with it, could not break with or transcend local Chinese social-political conditions. The May Fourth movement's reform-minded anti-traditionalism, cultural iconoclasm, and modernistic nationalism mirrored but could not create the conditions of a culture of enlightenment.

According to the failed modernity narrative, earlier revolutionary and later established communist intellectuals, as well as dissident intellectuals, have questioned Chinese traditions and appealed to Western ideas of progress, equality, and democracy without creating their intellectual, much less social conditions. One of the compelling aspects of Zhang's argument is how she challenges the narrative concerning China's incommensurability with Western modernity, the necessity of its belated temporality and alienness, without engaging in

the apologia, polemic, or trading in false equivalencies that hinder efforts in decentering the dominant Western view of China and in engaging in postcolonial critique.

Zhang's two primary examples of alternate Chinese enlightenments are found in Hu Shi 胡適 and Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛. Hu Shi advocated liberal democratic enlightenment through a renewal of Confucian *li* 禮 (ritual propriety) and *de* 德 (virtue) as constituting a socially oriented "ritual enlightenment." Informed by his study of Confucian and Western philosophy—although Zhang minimizes the importance of Hu's studies with John Dewey at Columbia University for his thinking about the public sphere, liberal democracy, and popular education—Hu emphasized both the individual autonomy and social-political responsibility suggested in the classical Confucian texts and the modern liberal public sphere's need for a renewed ritual propriety. What emerges is a distinctly modern and Confucian vision of the cultural, educational, and social-political promotion of an enlightened public life and democratic participation in the Chinese context, challenging the idea that this can only be a category mistake.

Gu Jiegang critiqued traditional Chinese historiography's problematic relation to the present, confronting historiography's ideological social-political functions and demystifying deeply rooted historical myths, such as those of the founding sage-kings and the racial identity and unity of the Han people, for the sake of the past's ethical and social significance in the present. Gu Jiegang fused philological and ethical sensitivity in renewing Confucian hermeneutical sensibility under the pressing conditions of modernity. In this case, a Chinese variety of enlightenment emerges as the renewal of self-understanding in the present in the context of engaging the past.

Through her account of multiple local enlightenments, in which theory and practice cannot be isolated from one another, Zhang criticizes approaches to the enlightenment and the intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement that establish a dichotomy and hierarchy between a high European Enlightenment based in culture and philosophy and lowly belated peripheral enlightenments concerned with colonial and national politics. Zhang returns to Kant's aporia of freedom and subordination to show the fictive ideological character of this ideal of enlightenment and how this is a double misreading of enlightenment in both Europe and China. Further, although the European Enlightenment continues to serve as a primary exemplar, given its undeniable historical import and impact, it can no longer be thought of as an exclusive paradigm or normative standard used to evaluate other enlightenments, other modernities, as derivative and inferior. Accordingly, reconsidering the May Fourth movement and associated intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Gu Jiegang promotes a

reinterpretation of enlightenment as global yet not uniform, as it concerns divergent localities instead of a static universal model generated from a misinterpretation of the Western Enlightenment, and as interpretively self-renewing in response to its own historical situation.

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ENDNOTES

1. Kant, 8: 35. References to Kant's works are to the pagination of the Akademie edition, cited by volume and page: Immanuel Kant, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited under the Königliche Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–1997). Quotations from the following translation is used: Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. T. Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983).
2. Kant, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, 8: 41.
3. *Ibid.*, 8: 41.
4. I explored Kant's problematic response to China in Eric S. Nelson, "China, Nature, and the Sublime in Kant," in *Cultivating Personhood: Kant and Asian Philosophy*, ed. Stephen R. Palmquist (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 333–346, and the possibility of a prudential resolution of the aporia of freedom and obligation in Eric S. Nelson, "Moral and Political Prudence in Kant," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 44, no. 3 (2004): 305–19.
5. Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).