

BOOK REVIEW

Chinese Just War Ethics: Origin, Development, and Dissent, edited by Ping-Cheung Lo and Sumner B. Twiss, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, 320 pp., US\$129.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1138824355

The most careful examination to date of the broad diversity of views concerning the ethics of war and peace-making found in classical Chinese thought, this pioneering collection of essays edited by Ping-Cheung Lo and Sumner Twiss will be valued by specialists and advanced politics and ethics classes alike. It offers a wide-ranging commentary on the philosophical standpoints with which the Anglophone world is already conversant, notably Confucianism and the Military School, and introduces possibly less familiar perspectives, like Mohism and Legalism, to a wider audience. The authors make a convincing case for scholars to reject simplistic stereotypes of Chinese military ethics and demonstrate that the history of just war thinking in China requires the same degree of in-depth study as is currently paid to the development of Western or Islamic just war discourses. The editors and authors are increasingly well known for their work in promoting understanding between Chinese and Western experts, and this volume may be seen as a foundation stone for a dialogue which they are continuing to press further through regular publications, workshops and conferences.

Lo's introductory chapter contrasts early Chinese philosophical literature with the reflections on war of ancient Greek writers, a choice which underlines to the reader how advanced the formative texts in the Chinese tradition were by contrast with those written in the West at that time. The asynchronic development of the first Western and Chinese discussions about what is right conduct in the making of war will continue to occupy scholars, who will be prompted to take up this comparative exercise by Lo's historical arguments about the determining historical influences on discourse about legitimacy and war revealed in the earliest origins of the tradition in West and East. A natural alternative, however, would instead be to use the more fully reasoned just war texts of ancient Rome or early Christianity as a point of comparison to the classic Chinese tradition: like for like. If this were granted, the grounds for comparison between the formative frames of references for what one may loosely call "Western" and "Chinese" military ethics look somewhat different. The nature of legitimate and illegitimate campaigns will also become the subject of new bodies of reflection, especially with regard to wars of a punitive nature, so the comparison would be able to take on a far more substantive form. To take that step would also mean moving away from the implied notion that there are essential features of "Chinese" and "Western" traditions, both of which were the subjects of a greater degree of diversity of perspective by this later period.

The editorial decisions made by Lo and Twiss are clearly shaped by analytical interests, one of which is revisionist in relation to the uses of these discursive traditions by the powers-that-be today, particularly but not limited to the current Chinese political establishment. It may be that this is implied in the employment of the term "just war tradition" as a framework for the study of arguments about right action in the making of war. The notion of the "just war tradition" is advanced in the chapters that bookend the collection, as well as

in the parts into which the book is divided. The book not only presents a well-conceived case for considering the comparable Chinese term to be a serviceable translation of “just war”, it also seeks to advance the understanding that there are ways in which the use of that term across the ages constitutes a “just war tradition”. The notion of the “tradition” makes subjective perspectives on discourse about justice and war a part of the object of study, and this distinguishes the book from a purely objective account of particular texts or bodies of literature about war, even though the reader may look for such accounts in the rich details presented in the book.

Whereas the foreword by James Turner Johnson highlights the potential for the focus on “traditions” to illuminate how people situated in self-identified cultures see themselves, the anthologised essays present new perspectives with a view to representing the entirety of “Chinese just war tradition”, and through much of the book this fresh perspective contrasts with contemporary political uses of this tradition. Thus, Lo’s chapter on Sunzian warfare ethics and Ellen Zhang’s chapter on Daoist views of punitive expeditions are presented as contemporary interpretations of a tradition’s founding text that may very well differ from those offered by members of the tradition themselves.

Twiss and Jonathan Chan’s chapter on Wang Yang-ming and Lo’s chapter on a Han Dynasty debate in 81 BCE also seek to capture the potential for new perspectives to arise from texts that they affirm did not prove immediately influential, reflecting very particular scholarly trends rather than a representative picture of the tradition at that time.

This problem of representation is reflected in the framing of chapters – with the exception of Aaron Stalnaker’s chapter on the Confucian thinker Xunzi – as accounts of just war thinking in a school of Chinese thought. All of the contributors in this book give rich detail concerning the traditions about which they write – Lo for the Military School (Chapters 2 and 3), Twiss and Chan for Confucianism (Chapters 4 and 5), Zhang for Daoism (chapters eight and nine) and Hui-Chieh Loy for Mohism (Chapter 10) – and they are able to weave these traditions into modern debates. This nevertheless does not do away with the representative issues that the use of the term “tradition” brings to the fore. The editors are aware that they are describing a Chinese “tradition” in terms intended to parallel the Western notion of the “just war tradition”, and readers are left with the question as to whether this is actually a living “tradition”. It may not be: for Chinese military ethics to be taken seriously in dialogue with “Western” partners, it may be enough for such a construction to be merely plausible as a resource for Western and Chinese interlocutors to use for reasoning. For the purposes of a theoretical dialogue, the reference to “traditions”, then, may be analogous to a Foucauldian genealogical mode of inquiry, establishing counter-discourses that disrupt the Chinese state’s occasional claim to be the bearer of uniquely Chinese values.¹

Lo’s concluding statement that the traditions of pre-modern China need to be “revived and refined” (268), will make sense in this regard: these traditions do not currently reflect the understandings of contemporary Chinese people or institutions, the more so given the transformations of Chinese politics in recent times. Nor is this only a question about the Chinese “just war tradition”: the revival of a Western “just war tradition” has also been achieved in recent times, and the term itself was not current before the mid-twentieth century.

The fact that this collection of essays covers a wide range of schools of thought and periods results in some sacrifice in detail, and in particular it has meant that the chapters do not explore the ambiguous relationships each school of thought has with each other in greater depth. For instance, it is noted (16, 31) that the Military School borrowed its political orientation extensively from other philosophies like Daoism and Confucianism,

though there is scant elaboration on the implications: Were the military thinkers referred to of the opinion that some of the tenets of Daoism and Confucianism were more morally relevant than others, or were the Daoist and Confucian sayings merely a convenient language adopted by these thinkers in order for their more original insights to be read? A still more intriguing relationship is that between Legalism and Confucianism. In Chapter 11, Lo equates Legalist doctrines with John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, an important feature of his broader argument about the rejection of moralism in Chinese strategic thought (254). However, the prudential calculations much used in Legalism may easily be construed as moral, and the same is true of a range of realist representations of the grounds for strategic action. Moreover, there is no hard and fast line between Legalism and the other, purportedly more moral, philosophical schools: Legalist precepts have been combined with the precepts of these other traditions, as well. According to Lo, *Taigong's Six Secret Teachings* mixes Legalism with Confucianism and Daoism (17), and Imperial China saw deliberate attempts to combine Legalism with the Confucian thinking of Dong Zhongshu (255). Lo's critique of the secular role of strategic amorality in Chinese military thought is put in powerful terms here, and if there is a more nuanced characterisation of the scope for combinations of moral and amoral reflection in Legalist and Confucian thought, there is currently no counter-narrative in the developing literature on the subject.

Rejoining the comparative project advanced by Lo, Twiss, and their expert contributors, a few additional intellectual paths that are not covered in this book open themselves to further study. A first is the role of moral discourse about actors outside of state institutions. In Chapter 10, Loy suggests that Mozi's writings on war were appeals to a wider public, rather than just the political leadership. The role of the public is a consideration in much Chinese philosophical writing on war, with the potential for starkly contrasting interpretations amongst scholars seeking a democratic strand in traditional Chinese thought and those opposed to this. The role of the Chinese everyman in assumptions about authentic or acceptable military action would provide grounds for further study framing the state's applications of traditional Chinese discourse about war and peace in a wider popular context.

A second avenue for further exploration could be found in the use of moral discourse by the People's Republic of China. Chapter 11 does provide a credible outsider account of the Chinese state's moral thinking in relation to classical texts. There is also an evident Clausewitzian influence in the rhetoric used within Chinese state institutions, and the moral frames that the Chinese government uses to articulate its foreign policy position of non-interference and active defense merit further attention.

A third possibility lies in viewing the "traditions" as active agents beyond the spatial confines of mainland China and beyond the contentious question of what constitutes authentic uses of tradition. There has yet to be an extensive examination of the influence of Confucianism, Daoism and the other philosophical schools referred to here on the military thinking of Taiwan, for example. How they have been used in military thinking elsewhere in East Asia is of equal historical and current political interest. The manner in which these ideas have adapted to the contingencies of various political situations is of natural interest to scholars and specialist practitioners engaged in the study of Chinese political and military thought, which need not undermine the case for the contemporary relevance of ancient Chinese theory as much as it strengthens it.

There is no comparable volume on Chinese just war ethics, and literature available in English on the topic before this work has been extremely limited by comparison. The sheer range of phenomena and periods that it addresses and the careful attention that it

gives to addressing its topic through multiple academic disciplines should keep specialist interlocutors occupied for the foreseeable future, and make the book an excellent and clear guide for engaged students studying ethics and war at university or in the military.


Note

1. An example of this is Junbo and Yunzhu (1996).

Reference

Junbo, Zhang and Yao Yunzhu. 1996. "Differences between Traditional Chinese and Western Military Thinking and Their Philosophical Roots." *Journal of Contemporary China*, 5 (12): 209–221.

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