

[Review]

## A review of Wang Xiaofang's book *The Civil Servant's Notebook*

Tatiana PUTINTSEVA, Michael HERRIMAN

### Abstract

In conversing with Professor McGrath one becomes aware of his interest in politics and philosophy, and particularly in the functioning of bureaucracies at all levels. For that reason we submit the article below. It is an account of a civil bureaucracy in China that could have failed to the detriment of those it was meant to most benefit, had it not been for a small number of bureaucrats who held fast to Confucian principles. The story, though fictional, bears an undisguised likeness to an event in recent Chinese history, when bureaucrats in a large city resorted to criminal acts to subvert the process of selecting the new mayor. Its reference to a particular event can be put aside, as one can recognize in it allusions to many other social and political events where contesting sides resort to immoral or illegal behavior to further their ends. The book deserves a place in the cannon of great allegories.

**Keywords:** China, politics, government, Confucianism

ワン・シャオファン著『公務員のノート』

タチアナ プティンツェヴァ・マイケル ヘリマン

In the last three decades, some of the many books that have documented the great changes in the history of China (today referred to as the Peoples Republic of China) have become minor classics. Notable amongst them are Heng's *Son of the Revolution* (1983) and Bao Lord's *Spring Moon* (1981). Both are personal accounts of the authors' and their families' lives in the years of chaos during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, when every aspect of one's life and every thought was rendered political. Of the more historical studies in English, that of Macfarquar & Schoenhal's *Mao's Last Revolution* (2006) probably gives the best account of that extraordinary era of economic and political chaos. The book reviewed here should find its place in company with the fore-mentioned even though it is fictitious, though only thinly so.

It is now fifty years since that time of turmoil, and China has developed dramatically to become one of the most advanced economies in the world. In terms of GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP) it is the world's number one economy (World Economic Outlook Database, 2016). Its enormous growth in that relatively short time might lead us to believe that its civil, economic and legal systems have attained a level of operation and distribution of social goods matching those of other advanced economies, and that such distribution might have been conducted on grounds of equality and merit. However, readers of the book under review might come to a different conclusion.

The *Civil Servant's Notebook*, though a work of fiction, is based on an actual event in recent Chinese history and provides an introduction to the intricacies and politics of civil administration at a very high level. Its plot and characters were inspired by real people and a scandal in the provincial politics of the country.

The opening of China to the Western world, which began in the early 1980s has (perhaps, as an un-intended consequence) promoted the idea that China had adopted a system of civil administration that is no longer so heavily controlled by the political dogmatism of the central government and the Chinese Communist Party. However, the civil administrative system, though decentralized to a significant extent (the reversion of control to the provinces being probably necessitated by the size of the country and its enormous population), can by no means be seen as free from political interference, not just at the national level, but also at the provincial one. The book reviewed here is an account of the politics in a fictitious city, apparently situated in the prosperous east of the country. The real event that it alludes to involved the scandalous political machinations preceding the appointment of a mayor to a major province. He was subsequently tried and executed for corruption. Furthermore, the book would lead us to believe that this kind of political machination was neither unique nor unfamiliar.

Even though we now think of China in its modern context, we must acknowledge that it has one of the oldest forms of civil government known in history. Marco Polo tells us of the vast reach and organization of the *celestial empire* he encountered, and his amazement at the scope of its bureaucracy (Otfinoski, 2003), which appears to have remained unchanged for more than two thousand years. Polo's descriptions might appear fanciful, but another source - the account of the court and bureaucracy

of the emperor Kang Shi by the Scottish doctor John Bell, who accompanied the Russian Tsar Peter's embassy to Peking (1719–1722), will dispel most doubts about Polo's observations (Bell, 1966). While living in St Petersburg, Bell witnessed the extraordinary modernization and civil organization wrought by Peter the Great (to whom he was physician). Nevertheless, it is obvious that he saw a far more complete and mature form of government in China. He expatiates extensively on the Chinese Emperor's system of bureaucracy emphasizing its thoroughness and reach as far as the Northern-most borders with Russia. His account lends credence to that of Polo and to some extent confirms much of what in Polo's telling is thought to be speculative or exaggerated. China was at that time and it is still the only empire that compares in size to Russia. The former empire of Britain is perhaps the only other comparable one, but the latter was in essence an economic system rather than a system of civil administration.

The bureaucrats who essentially governed China through its public service were originally (in the previous millennium) an aristocracy of military leaders, but this changed gradually with the increase in the power and status of the emperors who depended more upon the wise counsel of trained public servants. By the time of the last (Qing) Dynasty, entry to the civil bureaucracy was determined solely by success in the civil service examination, which was held every year and tested candidates on traditional scholarship which was rooted in Confucian philosophy. It is thought that in reality not all candidates passed on their merit since influential families could sometimes find a way of purchasing a pass. Yet it can be said generally that entry to the public service of China was indeed based on merit, and that its Mandarins conducted state affairs on the basis of Confucian ethical norms.

The overthrow of the Chinese emperor in 1911 brought about the fall of a system of government, which had lasted, mostly unchanged, for two millennia, but had become thoroughly corrupt and fatally weakened. A consequence of this was the removal of two fundamental cornerstones of Confucian society in the following year: the monarchy and the civil service examinations. There followed nearly forty years of social and political chaos as the country was effectively colonized by European powers (mainly Britain, France and Germany) and challenged by expansionism as a result of recidivistic motives on the part of Korea and Japan.

The consequent rise of modern China from the late middle years of the past century is certainly one of the great events of history, if measured by its speed and thoroughness. We have been led to believe that the Chinese Peoples' Republic embodies a kind of collectivism that principally benefits the public generally. Those fortunate enough to visit China in the period when it "opened" to the West in the early eighties would have been taken to carefully orchestrated meetings with selected local residents, who would have explained how much their lives had changed for the better under the guidance of Mao. Consequently, those visitors might have left the country thinking that social collectivism really formed the basis of that society.

Reading *The Civil Servant's Notebook* might dispel any such thoughts. On the one hand, there is

no doubt that the rise of the People's Republic of China did bring a better life to countless millions of people, but, on the other hand, the *big iron rice bowl* (a term the common people used ironically to refer to the new system) also provided ample opportunity for corruption. The latter probably exists to some extent in most countries, so it is not surprising that in a bureaucracy as large as that of China the scale might be also large.

The book describes a struggle between two cliques in the civil government of a fictitious city, Dongzhou, in support of one or the other of the two candidates for the position of mayor, emphasizing the tumult and corruption that preceded it. To the successful candidate would come all the prestige and perquisites of an extremely powerful post. The influence, monetary and fiduciary rewards accruing to the successful candidate would be great. His political favors and consequent direct access to public funds would be shared by the clique that had supported him. It is that largesse and attendant political power, which in this story drove the private secretary of one of the candidates to resort to illegal means in order to incriminate his opposing candidate and thus debar him from contention.

The author, Wang Xiaofang, was in real life private secretary to the deputy mayor of Shenyang, Ma Xiangdong, who was sentenced to death for embezzling more than 3.6 million dollars, which he lost gambling in casinos of Macau. Wang's knowledge of the politics of civil administration can scarcely be doubted. His book is a thinly veiled allusion to the politics of this episode and probably could serve as a revelation of the kind of bureaucratic in-fighting that might precede the momentous decision, when the successful candidate is *raised to heaven*, a phrase commonly invoked for such occasions.

The book reveals the way in which bureaucratic behavior in the Chinese civil service can directly defy the tenets expounded by Confucius. The magnitude of the rewards for accession to the mayoralty of a large Chinese city is great, and it is the reason for the existence of such bitter struggling for the prize, that being access to public funds and the ample opportunities it allowed for receiving bribes on a large scale: notably, large amounts of cash, luxury villas, gambling trips to Macau, etc. The victor in the struggle would of course bring all his supporters with him, which is why such carefully planned campaigns are fought with the support of devoted underlings. The losing clique would consequently suffer demotion and social humiliation.

The plot centers on a municipal government and its staff, who roughly fall into two categories: those who try to live according to Confucian principles and those who do not. Confucianism, which as noted previously, had been the official state philosophy of China since ancient times, is viewed as a cornerstone of Chinese culture (Lau, 1979) and as a system of ethics tied to the country's political philosophy (Wong, 2011). According to Confucian ethics, the state is a moral guardian of the people and all officials must be selected for their superior moral qualities. They are supposed to govern "by moral example and mediation" (Ibid.).

Just such an exemplary civil servant is Mayor Liu, who strives to do his best in order to serve the municipality and its people. He believes that his role is to achieve market efficiency, democratic values

and a harmonious society, and he works hard to ensure that his achievements can withstand the test of practice, time, and the scrutiny of the people. Mayor Liu then is an embodiment of Confucian ethics. He is supported in this quest by Director Xiao Furen, who shares the Mayor's values. Xiao reflects on Mayor Liu's achievements with admiration and wishes to continue serving him, even though career paths separated them.

In contrast, other characters portrayed in the book are selfish and greedy to the extreme. They are eager to use any means and to resort to criminal acts in order to achieve their goals. The highest-ranking official among them is Vice-Mayor Peng, who is corrupt and immoral. His "achievements" range from illegally obtained funds and gambling to an illicit affair followed by abandoning his mistress and driving her to despair.

The plot of the story is simple. Peng's secretary Hu Zhanfa, as corrupt and dishonest as his master, comes up with a scheme to produce a fake "Liu's diary", which would discredit Mayor Liu and end his career, thus clearing a path for Peng's own advancement. In this diary he describes all kinds of imaginary wrongdoings, attributing them directly to Liu. An intricate chain of events follows, at the end of which officers of the Provisional Disciplinary Committee expose the corruption rampant in a number of municipal offices, property groups, a local newspaper, the investment promotion bureau, and the public finance bureau. The public servants involved in the corruption ring not only ignored their duties as outlined by Confucian thinking and values, but also preoccupied themselves completely with the aim of securing material gains. They forgot that *wealth and rank attained through immoral means are like passing clouds* (Confucius, *Analects VII* as cited in Yu, 2009).

The narrative method used in the book is quite unusual and in places interestingly allegorical. In addition to the multiple human narrators, typical objects found in any office also engage in dialogues and tell of their role in the functioning of the municipal bureaucratic machine and its bureaucrats. This most amusing Swiftian move is very cleverly incorporated into the storyline. Amongst this group of witnesses to the politic machinations of the office are a desk, the government square, the stapler and the staples, the fountain pens, an office chair, the government car, and a name card. The Staple and the Stapler argue about philosophical view of politics, citing Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* and the writings of Milan Kundera on bureaucracies. The Staples disagree with Kundera's claim that in the bureaucratic world there is no freedom of action. Their argument was that some staples contrarily *bend outwards*. The Stapler states that *a successful public servant sticks to his leader like a staple and paper, he thinks his leader's thoughts, concerns himself with his leader's concerns and takes pleasure in what pleases his leader*.

As for human narrators, the most notable one is the Puppet Master (Peng), who directs the Puppet (his secretary Hu Zhanfa) and leads an elaborate intrigue in his quest for power. Reading his account brings to mind the great Chinese classic, *The Art of War* by Sun Tsu (1963). It is obvious that the Puppet Master –(Peng) and some other protagonists in Wang's book were familiar with the master

Tsu's tenets:

*All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.* (p. 83)

The Puppet Master echoes Sun's stipulations:

*I must remain behind the scenes. That way I can clearly see the flaws of the actors on the stage. This is what twenty years in government have taught me. In politics it is the hidden hand that is decisive. Only by remaining in the darkness can you see the bright places clearly. That's politics. Most important is to befuddle your enemy's senses.* (p. 62)

The characters in the story appear to be either completely good or thoroughly evil. Most are Machiavellian in their exercise of *real-politics*, that is, administering according to immediate needs or concerns, rather than on the basis of morals, precepts or precedents. For example, Vice-Mayor Peng states: "You need to both mistrust your friends and make use of your enemies" (p. 149). Another notes that "if you wanted to be a number one, you had to follow a number one" (p. 56).

The book is replete with other wonderful and thoughtful aphorisms, amongst them: "Life is nothing but a process of exchanging one want for another" (p. 16), "First board a ship and then decide where you are going" (p. 21), "If you want to avoid living a life that's merely a rough outline, you need to use the first half of your life to rehearse, and the second half to perform" (p. 268), "Hypocrisy is one of the fundamental skills of a politician, and the most profound lesson of politics" (p. 114), "The key to successful control is to make the controlled feel happy about it" (p. 85).

The book is somewhat challenging. It requires quite close reading, especially since the plot is intricate and is associated with and revealed through the thoughts and actions of very many characters, as well as the thoughts and perceptions of the various material objects found in the office. To completely understand the plot it might be useful to keep a note of the characters and relate them to the events described and the loyalties of the principal characters. If this labor is undertaken, you will find delight in this wonderful book and not a little to muse about when thinking of contemporary issues, such as the 2016 presidential campaign in the USA.

## References

- Bell, J. (1966). *Journey from St Petersburg to Peking*. London: Barnes and Nobles.
- Confucius (1979). *The Analects*. (D. C. Lau, Trans.). NY: Penguin.
- Heng, L. & Shapiro, J. (1983). *Son of the Revolution*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Lord, B. B. (1981). *Spring Moon*. NY: Harper and Row.
- Macfarquar, R. & Schoenhals, M. (2006). *Mao's Last Revolution*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

A review of Wang Xiaofang's book *The Civil Servant's Notebook*

Otfinoski, S. (2003). *Marco Polo: to China and back*. New York: Benchmark Book.

Sun Tsu (1963). *The Art of War*. (S. B. Griffith, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wang, X. (2012). *The Civil Servant's Notebook*. Melbourne: Penguin Group Australia.

Wong, D. (2011). Confucian Political Philosophy. In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*, G. Klosko (Ed.). DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238804.003.0048 Press.

World Economic Outlook Database - IMF (2016). Retrieved from  
<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2016/02/weodata/index.aspx>

Yu, D. (2009). *Confucius from the Heart*. Great Britain: Macmillan.