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Political thought through the lens of social structure

HISTORY

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As a discipline, the history of Chinese political thought has the attributes of both history and political science. Since it was established in the 1920s, scholars have conducted extensive and in-depth research, and achieved fruitful results. With the development of history and political science in the 21st century, studies of Chinese political thought history have entered a new era.

Major periodization models

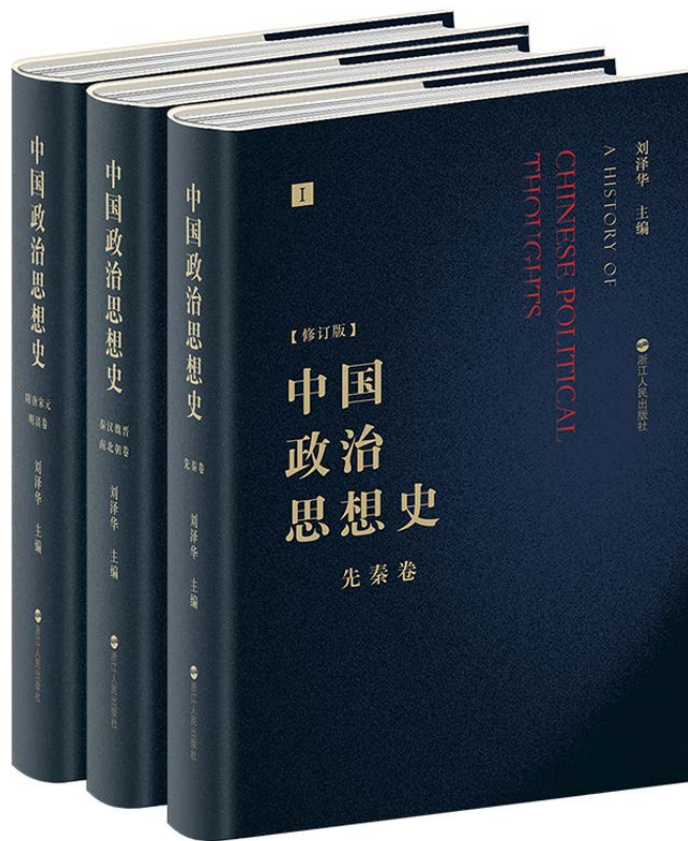
Periodization is significant to research on the history of Chinese political thought. Currently there are three periodization models. The first is natural periodization, which divides political thought into different periods by dynasties. Liu Zehua (1935–2018), a renowned professor of history from Nankai University, adopted this approach while compiling the *History of Ancient Chinese Political Thought* and *General History of Chinese Political Thought*.

The second method is based on the trend of how thought evolved. Representative works include *A History of Chinese Political Thought* authored by famed modern political scientist Hsiao Kung-chuan (1897–1981) and *History of China's Political Thought* by Cao Deben, a professor from the School of Humanities at Tsinghua University.

In his magnum opus, Hsiao distinguished four stages in Chinese political philosophy: the periods of Creativity (551–221 BCE), of Continuation (221 BCE–1367), of Change (1368–1898), and of Fruition “from the establishment of the Three People's Principles [a political philosophy developed by Sun Yat-sen, which are often translated into and summarized as nationalism, democracy, and the livelihood of the people] until the present.”

From the perspective of the transition from traditional to modern, Cao categorized the history of Chinese political thought into six blocks of time: formation, development, improvement, reflection, transformation, and reform, known as the “Six-Stage Development Theory.”

In the third model, the history of Chinese political traditions is periodized by social nature. Distinguished Marxist historian Lyu Zhenyu (1900–80) is a prime representative. Grounded in the five social forms (primitive, slave, feudal, capitalist, and communist society), the approach divides Chinese political thought history into the four periods of slavery, early feudalism, authoritarian feudalism, and semi-



FILE PHOTO: *A History of Chinese Political Thoughts* compiled by late Chinese historian Liu Zehua

colonialism and semi-feudalism.

Each model of periodization has its unique research angle and object, showcasing different landscapes of Chinese political thinking in history. The natural periodization method zooms in on important political thinkers, views of various schools of thought, and their development processes. Through the lens of the evolution trend of thought, Hsiao also focused on political thinkers and schools of thought in history, while Cao laid emphasis on political thinkers, schools of thought, and their development stages. The social nature approach pays attention to political philosophies of different classes and social strata, and their manifestations in different social stages.

Although the three periodization models all center on thinkers and schools of thought, their disparate research perspectives paint different pictures of the thinkers and schools of thought, greatly enriching our understanding and proving their huge value in theoretical guidance in the discipline.

Social structure as new angle

Into the 21st century, calls for localizing political science in China have become louder and louder. To build Marxist political science with Chinese characteristics by translating, integrating, and tailoring Western theories to China's actual conditions, it is essential to explore traditional Chinese political philosophies in depth, re-examine the history of political thought within a broader scope, and see new problem chains and sets, thus making

research of the field more theoretical, well-rounded, and systematic.

As such, we propose studying the history of Chinese political thought from the perspective of social structure, and classifying political philosophies into different types in light of different social structures.

Throughout China's recorded history, three major transformations took place in social structure. The first transformation happened during the Shang (c.1600–c.1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046 BCE–256 BCE) dynasties, followed by the transformation during the Warring States Period (770 BCE–476 BCE), Qin (221 BCE–207 BCE), and Han (220 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, and the third one during the late Qing Dynasty, roughly from 1840 to 1911, and the Republic of China Period (1912–49).

On the basis of the three transformations, we can divide the history of Chinese political thought into four periods: the Shang period; the Western Zhou (1046 BCE–771 BCE) and Eastern Zhou (770 BCE–256 BCE) period; the period from the Qin and Han to the late Qing dynasty, and that from the late Qing to the Republic of China.

Each period featured a distinctive social structure, political structure, and political philosophy. The four stages were marked, respectively, by the confederation of tribal states; similar structures of family, clan, and state (*jiaguotonggou*); bureaucracy and Prefecture-County System (*junxianzhi*), and the transition from traditional to modern. Each related type of political thought involved

a constellation of problems that arose from the integration of social and political structures.

During the Shang Dynasty, social and political structures were characterized by a loose confederation of tribal states with kings and tribes at the core. In terms of political thought, ancestor worship was pivotal. Revolving around this pivot were the construction of the ancestral system, sacrifice, and divination.

In the age of the Western and Eastern Zhou dynasties, similar structures of family, clan, and state were manifested in the respect for ancestors, seniors, and clan leaders, as well as primogeniture. There were such philosophies as the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*), All under Heaven (*tianxia*), patriarchal clan system, ritual system, and the doctrine of Self-Cultivation, Family Regulation, State Governance, and Bringing Peace to All under Heaven (*xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia*).

From the Qin and Han times all the way to the Qing Dynasty, social and political structures were based on the monarch, officials, and civilians. The Prefecture-County System and bureaucracy were the basic administrative models. The theory of harmony between man and nature (*tianren heyi*) and authoritarianism were the nuclear political philosophies. Around the nucleus were such theories as human-nature relations; benevolent governance (*renzheng*); and the Three Cardinal Guides (*sangang*: ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife) and Five Constant Virtues (*wuchang*: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity)—a principle of feudal moral conduct.

Between the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China era, anti-imperialism and anti-feudalism were major political philosophies, consisting of reform and revolutionary theories to seek a path towards national salvation for China.

The above revelations of each thought structure are far from enough, but they can provide a new perspective, from which we can first see diverse political problems occurring during the integration of social and political structures in each stage. Then we may also see the political theories suited to the social realities of each stage that emerged to solve those problems.

Value of social structure angle

This path of thinking from the social structure angle was also valued by previous generations of academics. For example, Hsiao noted that the history of Chinese political thought can be periodized by historical background into a feudal world, an authoritarian

empire, and a modern China. Cao also clarified that China's political thought history is in line with the development of Chinese society. Lyu stressed the prerequisite of correctly understanding the economic and political conditions of each era for drawing accurate conclusions in the study of political philosophies.

Our thinking path and periodization approach inherits from these and other predecessors. It is preconditioned by doctrines of Marxist dialectical materialism and historical materialism, such as productivity determining relations of production and the economic base determining superstructure. Paying more attention to social and political structures, we follow the model of researching from social realities to problems, further to thought, while emphasizing the problem-centered approach.

Studying the history of Chinese political thought from the perspective of social structure fully reflects the discipline's characteristic of blending history and political science. During the re-examination of traditional Chinese political philosophies through the lenses of modern political science and the localization of political science, importance is attached not only to the connotations of thought, but also its extensions and structural functions, making the study more focused, structuralized, and consistent. In this process, numerous factors like society, politics, institutions, and ideas are involved.

For example, the ancestor worship tradition in the Shang Dynasty, if reflected in political life, required people to consult ancestors through divination whenever great events occurred. Institutionally, it was concerned with complicated sacrificial rituals. The theory of harmony between man and nature shaped during the Qin and Han dynasties embodied the respect for nature in thought and system. In political life, the theory would drive high-ranking officials to resign from office during a natural disaster [because the disaster was believed to result from some immoral behavior on the part of the officials].

As Yang Haijiao, former deputy director of the Institute of Political Science at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, pointed out, the history of political thought has increasingly become a comprehensive academic field. This will substantially expand the frontiers, problem scope, and research depth of political philosophy, deepening studies of China's political thought history.

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