Abolishing Boundaries: Global Utopias in the Formation of Modern Chinese Political Thought, 1880-1940. Peter Zarrow. New York: SUNY Press, 2021. xiii + 273 pp. Paperback. ISBN-13: 9781438482828.

Peter Zarrow remarks at the outset of his splendid new book that utopian thinking ended the twentieth century in deep disfavor: both communist and liberal-cosmopolitan projects looked unpromising while narrow nationalisms were on the rise. The goals of *Abolishing Boundaries* are set against our present skepticism about sweeping transformations. It is well known that Maoist radicalism was built on a kind of utopianism, but Zarrow argues that we cannot make sense of a much wider range of Chinese thinkers without attending to their "utopian impulses." Utopias are thus relevant more broadly than previous scholarship has recognized. Furthermore, Zarrow urges us to see the critical value of utopian thinking. Utopianism cuts against boundary-constructing nationalist, patriarchal, or racist narratives. Zarrow writes that it is "hard to imagine historical progress without at least some people holding up a utopian vision of what progress can attain" (2). The book also explores the ways in which its four protagonists develop their thinking about "global utopias" as part of an emerging global conversation, itself suggestive of future possibilities for a more collaborative world. *Abolishing Boundaries* has lessons for us both about the recent Chinese past and about possible human futures.

Utopias are important because they express an essentially secular faith in the "the perfectibility (or near-perfectibility) of the world" (4). A utopian impulse is thus more than mere optimism or confidence in human progress, even if "progress" is critical to utopianism and comes up again and again in the book. Utopia is in play whenever a thinker has a quasi-religious "faith," outrunning any evidence they might have, in the possibility of progress. Zarrow distinguishes this from religious faith because the latter is "eschatological and not of this world" (194). Such a (narrow) religious vision plays no significant role for his subjects. Indeed, Zarrow takes pains to emphasize that most of the figures he studies in the book are not full-fledged utopians with detailed visions of their anticipated future; their utopianism is instead found in "impulses" that drive them.

Zarrow focuses on four men in the book: Kang Youwei, Cai Yuanpei, Chen Duxiu, and Hu Shi. All four are of course major figures who have been well studied, but by juxtaposing them and emphasizing their utopianism, Zarrow is able to shed new light on each. We better understand how they could combine cautious, often pragmatic political action with strikingly ambitious or even wildly imaginative goals. For each, the overcoming of boundaries separating some humans from others was a central, abiding objective — thus the title of the book — even when they saw some temporary value in national solidarity. Among other things, Zarrow's reading of Kang Youwei is thus a significant challenge to those mainland Chinese thinkers today who believe that a "return to Kang Youwei" might allow for a fundamentally different and more nationalist narrative of China's place in the world than those revolving around May Fourth thinkers. For each figure, Zarrow makes a strong case for the importance of utopian impulses. On the surface, Hu Shi seems the most unlikely candidate, but Zarrow plausibly argues that he held to a "processual utopianism insofar

as Hu treated the process of achievement — progress ever upward, improvement never-ending — in utopian terms," very much depending on a kind of "faith" (143).

One of the book's most distinctive characteristics is its emphasis on the global circulation of ideas. Zarrow is not so concerned with tracking influences nor with the accuracy with which a given Chinese thinker understood what some idea meant to a European or American audience. Instead, he seeks to show how the "echoing and intertwining" (18) of ideas in related but distinct contexts was central to a kind of global utopian discourse. He applauds this "creative appropriation" of ideas to "build solidarity and seek truth" (140), adding that Hu Shi, for example, may have in some sense "misread" Dewey, but he did so in creative and productive ways (182). Zarrow lets readers themselves judge the distinctiveness and creativity with which his four subjects engage in (and contribute to) the global circulation of ideas, because he spends considerable effort to explain Bellamy, Kant, Dewey, and numerous others in their own contexts. Zarrow clearly does not see the issues his protagonists grappled with as settled, and his approach both respects the thinkers' agency and leaves questions open for further exploration: he notes in the book's conclusion that "we too may find something useful and provocative in the alternative imaginings" discussed in the book (183).

How important is utopian thinking in modern China? Zarrow ends the book by engaging with Thomas Metzger's well-known thesis that Chinese political thinking quite generally, both traditional and modern, is characterized by a ubiquitous "epistemological optimism" (195). There are certain ways in which this thesis dovetails with Zarrow's own account, but Zarrow objects to the breadth of the brush with which Metzger paints. There are major thinkers, Zarrow says, who are innocent of even his more modest category of "utopian impulse," much less full-fledged epistemological optimism. Zarrow agrees with much of Jiwei Ci's critique of Metzger, to the effect that what looks like enduring utopianism is actually "ideological discourse" used to justify claims to power (196). I myself think that while Ci's critique of Metzger's monolithic model of Chinese political thinking makes some important points, Ci goes too far in rejecting the seriousness of "optimistic" (or perhaps utopian) epistemologies, and Zarrow should be cautious about how completely he abandons Metzger. After all, Zarrow himself notes that a key to Cai's utopianism is his "confidence in the knowability of the noumenal world" (80), which is a perfect instance of Metzger's epistemological optimism.

Abolishing Boundaries is deeply sourced in primary texts and draws on the best secondary scholarship from around the world, but it is far from a dry read. Zarrow finds the utopian impulses of his four subjects to be inspiring and hopes that readers will do so as well. If we think of this book as itself a contribution to a new global circulation of ideas, perhaps it can help to catalyze new forms of faith in humans' ability to progress beyond the many boundaries that divide us today.

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