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On the Bureaucratic Features of Chinese Society: Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy: Variation on a Theme

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Book Reviews

ON THE BUREAUCRATIC FEATURES OF CHINESE SOCIETY

CHINESE CIVILIZATION AND BUREAUCRACY: VARIATIONS
ON A THEME. By Etienne Balazs. Trans. by H. M. Wright.
Edited by Arthur F. Wright. New Haven and London: Yale
University Press, 1964. xix, 309 pp. Chronology, Index.

In 1962, the East Asian Research Center of Harvard University and the Council on East Asian Studies of Yale University agreed to sponsor the publication of a selection of the writings of Etienne Balazs. Born in Hungary in 1905 and educated in France and Germany, Etienne Balazs had been, for some thirty years, one of the most distinguished scholars in the field of Chinese Studies. When the Sixth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne) devoted to economic and social studies was established in 1947, Balazs was appointed to the chair for the economy and society of ancient China. He was also the leading spirit in the organization in 1954 of a large-scale collaborative project to produce an encyclopedic manual of the history of the Sung Dynasty (960-1279).

Balazs himself made the initial selection of the essays to be included in the volume. Most of the essays finally chosen were first published in the ten years between 1952 and 1961. The nine chapters grouped under the heading *Institutions* and the two chapters under *History* fall within this period. The five chapters grouped under *Thought* were earlier works: three written in the 1930's and two in 1948. Only three of the articles included in the volume were originally published in English. The rest, articles which had first appeared in such journals as *Etudes Asiatiques*, *Monumenta Serica*, *T'oung Pao*, and *Sinica*, were translated into English from the original French or

German by Mrs. Hope M. Wright who succeeds admirably in concealing her presence.

The range of topics covered in the volume is proof enough of the breadth of Balazs' interests, as well as his command of his field. His analysis of such subjects as the birth of capitalism in China (34-54), the character of Chinese towns and cities (55-100), patterns of land-ownership from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries (101-125), shows the same sure grasp of material evident in his study of the poetry of Ts'ao (173-186), the reforms of Li Kou (277-289), the polemical anti-Buddhist tract of Fan Chen (255-276), and the philosophy of the *ch'ing t'an* sages (226-254). His judgments on Chinese historiography (129-149) and his views on the bureaucracy (3-27 and *passim*) are clearly defined and provocatively expressed.

Perhaps, an inevitable feature of any compilation of essays written at different times over a long span of years is a certain degree of overlapping. Essays dealing with the same subject, or covering the same period, duplicate the detailing of necessary background material which, in a full-length book, would be despatched in the first few chapters. The overlapping is the more noticeable in this work because, as Arthur Wright points out in his introduction, "the essays on history and thought are concentrated heavily on the break-up of the first Chinese empire of Han and the Age of Disunion which followed it" (xvii), while the essays on institutions all somehow revolve around social structure.

This feature, however, is not necessarily a flaw. In the process of providing background information and establishing the framework for discussion, Balazs invariably discloses the distinctive pattern that the historical events have formed in his mind. The constant restatement of this pattern underlines the ideas Balazs considers essential to the understanding of Chinese history and stamps the volume with a unity and movement of its own—not chronological, nor simply topical, but thematic.

The theme to which Balazs repeatedly returns is the idea of China as a bureaucratic society. It was the scholar-official class, according to Balazs, which gave Chinese civilization its distinctive character, its stability, and its power of survival. Numerically an insignificant fraction of the total population, the members of this class constituted themselves into a bureaucracy indispensable to the administration of the empire. The two thousand years of Chinese civilization cannot be accurately assessed, according to Balazs, unless the bureaucratic features of Chinese society are accepted and understood. The essays in the volume provide factual and varied illustrations of this theme.

The power of the scholar-officials was not primarily based on land, though they were often the largest landowners. Nor was it based on blood, though the class tended to reproduce itself. Their power as a class rested on the social functions they filled: they drew up the calendar, coordinated water-control activities, managed uniform weights, measures, currency, organized defense, directed education. The services they rendered, though not directly productive, were the essential social services without which the empire could not long endure.

Once having risen to the apex of the social pyramid, they proved almost impossible to dislodge from their favored position. There was no group within the society that could rival them in prestige, wealth, and power. Moreover, their monopoly of public offices, guaranteed by their control of both the educational system and the civil service examinations, gave their class the privilege of self-propagation. Only when popular rebellions rocked the peasant base of the pyramid was the position of the bureaucrats endangered, and, indeed, sometimes lost. But their retirement was always only temporary. Order could be restored only on the basis of the model that had been overthrown. Neither peasant rebel leaders, nor warlords, nor barbarians, could replace the bureaucrat class and assume its functions: "in a peasant China it was a rule without exception that the alternative to the reign of the bureaucracy was anarchy" (21). Thus, the re-establishment of a new dynasty was simply the reconstruction of the same pyramid and, hence, the return of the scholar-officials to the top.

The preponderant power which their offices gave them also placed at their disposal instruments of social control which enabled them to reduce dissent. While inexorably tightening their hold over the state, they also gave direction to the empire as a whole: "it is this social stratum, tiny, but of considerable specific gravity—that determines the total structure" (153). Thus, whether he is considering a problem in philosophy, or economic history, or historiography, Balazs looks for a key to the answers in the role of the scholar-official class.

Balazs sees the emergence of Confucianism as the state creed, for instance, as reflecting the ascendancy of the scholar-official class over the state. In the hands of the bureaucracy, Confucian doctrines are fashioned into an ideology that recognized and justified its privileged status. The virtues the Confucian canons preached were the very virtues the bureaucrat class wanted to propagate: submission, obedience, subordination to one's elders and betters. The non-religious, rationalist outlook of Confucianism protected the bureaucrats from the subversive tendencies that often concealed themselves behind a mask of mysticism. Its conformist and traditionalist bent helped enforce

strict adherence to orthodoxy and, thus, buttressed the bureaucracy against the pressure of other social groups.

One group in particular, the merchants, might have been able to build up enough strength to challenge the ruling class. But the merchants in China failed to accomplish what their counterparts in the West did. The merchant class in China was never allowed to develop to a point where it could threaten the mandarins. The restrictions imposed on this class were justified by the Confucian doctrine of "the four classes" which consigned the sterile merchant class to the bottom of the social scale:

...every means of keeping the merchant class down and holding it in subjection seemed permissible. Compromises, exceptions, favors, pardons—all were allowed so long as they were retracted at the earliest opportunity. Claims, titles, privileges, immunities, deeds, charters were never granted. Any sign of initiative in the other camp was usually strangled at birth, or if it had reached a stage when it could no longer be suppressed, the state laid hands on it, took it under control, and appropriated the resultant profits (41).

Balazs concludes that the failure of China's merchant class to establish a capitalist economy was not due to a lack of mechanical skill, or scientific aptitude, or a sufficient accumulation of wealth, but to the stifling of individual enterprise by a jealous and an all-powerful bureaucracy:

There was no individual freedom and no security for private enterprise, no legal foundation for rights other than those of the state, no alternative investment other than landed property, no guarantee against being penalized by arbitrary exactions from officials or against intervention by the state. But perhaps the supreme inhibiting factor was the overwhelming prestige of the state bureaucracy, which maimed from the start any attempt of the bourgeoisie to be different, to become aware of themselves as a class and fight for an autonomous position in society (53).

The slight attention accorded the merchants in Chinese historical works derives, of course, from the contempt of trading activities which the scholar-officials fostered. As a rule, however, the histories show little concern for the activities of the common people. Given the traditional view of history as a guide for the present, historical writing could hardly escape the bureaucracy's control. The character and content of Chinese histories were determined by the fact that "history was written by officials for officials" (135). Because they were conceived as being guides to administrative practice, histories had to treat of those subjects officials were expected to know: "the general instruction provided by the treatises was aimed... at producing not scholars but statesmen and administrators who were knowledgeable about all government activities, and who would be useful members of the ruling class" (141).

The control exercised by the bureaucrats over history-writing accounts not only for its orientation but also for its defects. Chinese historians were salaried dependents of the state whose duty was to glorify their master and to denounce his enemies. The worst drawback of official historiography, however, was not the possible prejudice

to which dependence upon the reigning power may lead, but the limitation of history within the dynastic framework.

The necessity of conceiving of history in dynastic terms, for cutting up the flow of events into clearly separated slices, was of poor service to Chinese historians, forcing them to keep their ideas in watertight compartments. Moreover, the cyclic principle and the lack of continuity swayed the balance in favor of amassing disconnected series of isolated facts, and discouraged attempts to find any system of relations or any sequence in these facts (133).

The bureaucracy does not only illuminate the past, it also provides a link with the present. The Chinese Communists can appeal to the national traditions to justify many of the steps they have taken and, in fact, the very structure they have established:

State officials and party cadres are as privileged today as the mandarins used to be, and prescribe in as much detail the duties of the ordinary mortal, who has not become anymore precious in their eyes. The fountain pen is used instead of the writing brush and the Communists have replaced the Confucianists, but at bottom it is the same intelligentsia that assumes the indispensable function of direction, command, and administration (169).

But the lessons in China's past are not for Mao Tse-tung alone. Balazs observes that China could have served as a model for the ruling stratum of the Russian state:

[Russia's] new bureaucracy copies unaware, or rather re-creates, many of the patterns of thought and organization belonging to the old Chinese scholar-officials, beginning with intolerance and the single-party system, continuing through monopoly of public opinion, education, and foreign trade, and ending with collective responsibility, shirking of responsibility by key officials in the hierarchy, worship of discipline, the *pao-pien* method (painting the memory of the dead either black or white), permission to commit suicide as a special measure of grace, and so on (25).

Moreover, the tendencies towards "bureaucratic, technocratic state control" are visible not only in totalitarian states like Soviet Russia and Communist China, but in twentieth century civilization as a whole. Even in the West, "with the greatest reluctance on the part of all concerned, state control has been introduced more and more" (25).

In order that capitalism might be saved, laissez-faire and free enterprise have gone by the board and centralized organization has begun to take their place—first introduced to carry on the war (National Socialism having already established totalitarian methods in Germany), in order to survive at all, and later retained in order to live in peace without the encumbrance of outmoded institutions. Now is the time of managers, of the technocrats, and of planning (25-26).

The Chinese experience has become relevant to the twentieth century because in many respects China was a totalitarian state. She was totalitarian in her methods of control; the devices introduced by the scholar-officials—the secret police atmosphere of mutual suspicion, the arbitrary character of justice, the principle of collective responsibility, the tendency on the part of the state to clamp down on every form of private enterprise—have become characteristic features of the modern totalitarian state. China's bureaucrats were undoubtedly less efficient than their modern counterparts, but they were no less totalitarian in ideology:

If by totalitarianism is meant total control by the state and its executives, the officials, then it can indeed be said that Chinese society was to a high degree totalitarian. In this as in so many other things, the Confucianists supplanted the state-minded Le-

gallists only to carry out even more rigorously the doctrines they had preached. State control and state intervention existed here long before these activities became common technical terms (16).

Being specialists in the handling of men and experts in the political art of governing, the scholar-officials were the embodiment of the state, which was created in their image—a hierarchial, authoritarian state, paternalistic yet tyrannical; a tentacular welfare state; a totalitarian Moloch of a state (17).

Not the least admirable of Balazs' virtues as a scholar is his insistence that scholarship be relevant to the major intellectual concerns of the modern world. He is understandably impatient with those who indulge in the luxury of "philological hair-splitting" and other "delightfully antiquated occupations" while neglecting "such frivolous things" as the economic basis of a civilization and the dynamics of its social structure. The events of the twentieth century, according to Balazs, have prepared Western scholars to understand the bureaucratic features of Chinese civilization. At the same time, he is convinced that the study of the history of China's bureaucracy will throw light upon the totalitarian, state-centered, bureaucratic tendencies of the contemporary world.

"We can only understand what we already know, and what is more, we can become genuinely interested only in something that touches us personally" (14). Balazs' experience as a refugee from Nazism in the last war, perhaps, accounts for his sensitivity to the totalitarian aspects of Chinese culture. Other writers have already called attention to the importance of ideology in Chinese, or, rather, Confucian, political theory. Confucius did not have too much faith in state-promulgated laws and external punishments. These were at best remedial measures. More important was internal control; men must be taught to form the correct judgments, cultivate the proper virtues. Once the ideology has taken root, government would all but wither away. The state would be needed for only two purposes: to insure the orthodoxy of the society and to defend the society against those who do not subscribe to the ideology. The two threats to the social order were heretics and unbelievers.¹ It would be misleading, however, to imagine that the Chinese depended solely on cultural or ideological control to maintain its hold over the population. This is the illusion that Balazs shatters beyond repair. He points out that China was ruled by men who, aside from being Confucian scholars and Taoist sages, were often also Legalist officials. In their capacity as administrators, they were not beyond resorting to methods which can justly be described as totalitarian.

It is possible, however, that Balazs overstates his case. His rather violent condemnation of Confucianism and the scholar-official class as totalitarian is, perhaps, too extreme and certainly will not go unchallenged. Wm. Theodore de Bary, for instance, while conceding the

¹ Paul Linebarger *The Political Doctrines of Sun-Yat-Sen* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1937), pp. 34 ff.

susceptibility of Confucianism to despotic control, warns against viewing the whole of Chinese history as one long period of unrelieved totalitarian oppression:

... It would be well to consider what Confucianism may have contributed to the softening and humanizing of Chinese despotism, through its continuing efforts to restrain the exercise of absolute power by moral suasion and to reform the governmental structure itself. Cynics may deprecate the effectiveness of moral suasion in politics and grant to Confucianism less credit than it probably deserves. Now that we find China stripped of any such moderating influence, we may be better able to appreciate by comparison how much this humane teaching and its more courageous spokesmen tempered the absolutism of traditional China.²

Balazs himself is aware that his delineation of Chinese culture may be somewhat lacking in balance. But he considers the deliberate omission of the happier elements in Chinese life justified: "it is my firm conviction that they flourished not because conditions were favorable, but as by-products of a harsh reality that would have justified a more tragic outlook on life" (156).

But there are other difficulties which call for clarification. In speaking of China as "the permanently bureaucratic society," Balazs gives the impression that the establishment of imperial unity also marked the beginning of bureaucratic control. But the empire and the bureaucratic class were not born in the same moment. The growing consensus among students of Chinese history is that only in Late T'ang and Early Sung times, or some five hundred years after the founding of the first empire, did the bureaucracy become dominant. Secondly, Balazs seems to overrate the reach of the bureaucrats. The empire did not have the necessary resources to supervise the population to a degree even approximating that exercised by modern totalitarian governments. Moreover, the "law of avoidance" by which officials were assigned to regions where they had no influence, made these imperial agents virtually dependent upon the local elites. These local leaders undoubtedly imposed their own despotism over the ordinary citizens, but, needless to say, their inclinations and the wishes of the central government did not always coincide. Thirdly, Balazs tends to speak of the ruling class as if it were a monolithic structure. There was, in the first place, the line between the emperor and the bureaucracy proper. It is surprising that, although he repeatedly stresses the absolutism of the bureaucracy, he hardly mentions the absolutism of the emperor. Because the government was so institutionalized and so centralized, the ministers could become powerful enough to usurp the authority from a weak emperor. The emperors who were alert enough to see the danger tried to check the drift of power into the hands of the ministers by personally assuming control of the administration and retaining the initiative for all decisions. Since they often distrusted the existing organs of government, they would create special,

² Wm. T. de Bary, "Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal: A Seventeenth Century View," *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, edited by John K. Fairbank (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957) p. 164.

unofficial bodies which would function outside the bureaucratic hierarchy. Here, then, was a second cleavage: the line drawn between the Inner Court of men who often held no official, substantive positions but enjoyed the confidence of the emperor, and the Outer Court of "career" bureaucrats. A third element in the power play within the ruling class was the group of court eunuchs whose power rested upon their influence with the Empress, the concubines, and the imperial children. With a set-up like this, even granting that the machinery for imposing the will of the government on the people existed, genuine totalitarian control by one man or by one clique would, perhaps, have been still the exception rather than the rule.

The title of the collection was given by Etienne Balazs himself *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy: Variations on a Theme*. It is providential that Etienne Balazs was himself so intimately involved in the preparation of this volume. He died in November 1963, a week after giving his approval to the final table of contents. In a sense, therefore, the book is his final testament—the fruit of a lifetime of mature reflection and disciplined scholarship. The ambivalence, suggested by the title, of what seems to have been Balazs' final assessment of Chinese civilization, is noted by Arthur Wright in his introduction to the volume.

On the one hand, he admired the great achievements of the Chinese: the creation of the most enduring political order in history, the brilliance of their art and literature, the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the builders and reformers of three millennia who dealt with the whole range of problems of man and society and often reflected brilliantly upon them. On the other hand, he was sensitive to the human cost of these achievements: the oppressions of orthodoxy, the authoritarianism of the traditional family and the educational system, that totalitarian strain that found expression in law, government, and the instruments of social control (ix).

The book is, in fact, a storehouse of the many insights of Balazs into Chinese civilization. But more than this, it must also serve, in the words again of Arthur Wright, as "a memoir of a great man and a great scholar, a reminder to us and to our students that our studies of China will be neither valid nor enduring if expertness in research is not wedded to a deep engagement with the human problems of our time" (JAS, 23:3).

EDILBERTO DE JESUS, JR.

RACIAL PREJUDICE IN THE LUSITANIAN EMPIRE?

RACE RELATIONS IN THE PORTUGUESE COLONIAL EMPIRE, 1415-1825. By C. R. Boxer. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963. 136 pp.