

G. E. R. Lloyd, *The Delusions of Invulnerability: Wisdom and Morality in Ancient Greece, China and Today*. Duckworth: London, 2005. 176 pp.

### Mark Elvin

*[In the course of more than forty years, Mark Elvin has worked on a range of themes. These have included the earliest local democratic institutions in modern China, the long-term economic growth of China from early imperial times to the end of the empire, aspects of Chinese women's history and the computer modeling of the population dynamics in Jiangnan during Qing times, the long-term historical geography of China, and, following this, the long-term environmental history of China down to the end of the nineteenth century. At all times he has had a continuous interest in the history of premodern Chinese science and technology as these interwove with the economy and the environment. His particular personal focus has however been on premodern Chinese efforts at probabilistic thinking. His especial academic self-indulgence has perhaps been an inability to resist the temptation to make translations of old Chinese poems, often about everyday life, to illustrate Chinese social, intellectual, and environmental history. He has also done fieldwork in western Yunnan, western Anhui, and the Hangzhou Bay area. Having retired about three years ago, he has shifted to looking at aspects of plant science in late seventeenth-century Europe, with a perspective informed by comparisons with China at broadly the same time, tormenting himself linguistically with Baroque Latin rather than literary Chinese.]*

Geoffrey Lloyd is exceptional in having both a linguistic and analytical mastery of the classics of western antiquity and a lately acquired, but serious, grasp of classical Chinese and the important classical Chinese works down to the end of the Han. He has been one of the first to travel the difficult double road that most comparativists are going to have to steel themselves to follow in the future.

*Delusions of Invulnerability* is a loosely-linked set of six essays on individual topics of socio-intellectual history treated in terms of contrasts between ancient Greece and ancient China. The identification of these guiding themes is in itself a useful initial contribution to our thinking about the subject. Each chapter also ends with a mildly homiletic coda, suggesting lessons that the modern Western world might draw from the ideas presented.

The first topic is the pluralism of philosophic traditions. Lloyd sees this as common to both ancient Greece and ancient China, though with an important difference: the ancient Chinese did not debate the advantages and disadvantages of different political structures. While this is probably true, he should have added that the Chinese in this period *did* discuss possible differences in particular institutions and policies. The statesman Zichan 子產 (died 522 BC) of the state of Zheng, an immediate

predecessor of Confucius, was once asked if he favoured putting an end to the *xiangxiao* 鄉校, institutions that functioned both as local schools and a community meeting-places where participants came to take their leisure, and talk in critical terms about state policy. He replied that, to the contrary, he followed the views of these people, regarding them as his “teachers” in keeping people contented. He then used a hydraulic metaphor: major breaches of dykes were uncontrollable and disastrous, whereas opening small breaks in this fashion let one make a controllable course for the water (*Zuozhuan* 左傳, Xianggong 31). Another example was whether laws should be publicly available in written form, which Confucius disliked as not being in the spirit of ritual behaviour, or, as we might say, too mechanistic (as mentioned on pages 133 and 136). Nor does Lloyd explore the fact that at this period the Chinese ‘alternative’ to what was widely accepted as the only possible basic structure of government was, in effect, an absence of government, as in the idealized pre-political natural world of the *Huainanzi*. A partially comparable Buddhist variation, leading to a major controversy that arose not long after the end-point of Lloyd’s time-frame, was the view of Chinese Buddhists like Huiyuan 慧遠 (334-416) that “a monk does not bow before a king” *shamen bu jing wang* 沙門不敬王 (discussed by Zürcher in *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (1959), pp. 106ff, 231-239). Essentially, it was claimed that, though respectful towards secular power, the monk belonged to an intrinsically different world. By the Tang, though, the notion of an anthropogenic political system (*zhi* 制) as an entity distinct from some sort of nature on the one hand, and from specific policies, good or bad, on the other, had emerged. The best-known example of this is the short essay *Fengjian lun* 封建論 (On ‘feudalism’) by Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819) in which he argues for the greater inherent stability of a meritocratic bureaucratic structure as opposed to the hereditary ‘feudal’ structure of pre-Qin times. The presence of implicit pro and contra argument is apparent from how he deals with important possible objections, which he introduces (as did Wang Chong much earlier) with the phrase *huozhe yue* 或者曰... “someone may say:...”. That this falls outside the author’s selected time-frame shows there is a certain danger in the reader drawing impressions that, while relatively sound for the period identified, may be significantly incomplete for Chinese imperial history as a whole.

At times, Lloyd seems to set his readers challenges. In this first chapter, after pointing out that in neither culture in ancient times was there was an agreed conception of what ‘philosophy’ was, and no clear single term for it, the reader is left to ponder how one might – as a descriptive historian – usefully define something like ‘the practice of philosophy’? It appears to me that one could get by to a first approximation with something like: “a concern with *conceptually* exploring whether or not there is

an *intellectual reason* for changing one's mind on a *general* as opposed to a specific matter of interest, either on the basis of new arguments, or of new information, or both." Though hazy at the edges, as highlighted by a residual imprecision in the words italicized, this formulation would seem to exclude divine revelation, the uncritical following of human authority, and experimental science, while including most of what matters. At a sort of conceptual right angle lies the concern with how effectively to change *other* people's minds, in other words 'rhetoric'. Lloyd, perhaps in a way wisely, does not follow up problems such as this.

The second topic is how learned elites were recruited, trained, and controlled. Here, exceptionally, and usefully, Lloyd for a moment introduces a third dimension of intersocietal comparison. This is Mesopotamia prior to the full crystallization of the classical Greek and classical Chinese worlds. He shows that the Mesopotamian semi-hereditary, scholarly intellectual-professional stratum that emerged, consisting mainly but not entirely of officials linked to the mastery of canonical texts, was in many ways closer to the Chinese than the Greeks. In both ancient Mesopotamia and ancient China, the function of the divination of the fortunes of the rulers and of their polity was, for example, of major importance. This is an area, though, where some reference to more general sociological-historical works would have been valuable as context. Examples that come to mind are Randall Collins' *The Sociology of Philosophies* (1998) or parts of Shmuel Eisenstadt's *The Political Systems of Empires* (1963), which is surprisingly good on China. The Greeks, especially of the *polis* period, Lloyd argues, were historically unusual both in their relatively socially open recruitment, and in their high degree of reliance on the support of relatively popular audiences and private persons like students, as opposed to government or aristocratic patronage. I think we must agree with him here.

The coda on our own times deals mostly with the problem of what we might term 'establishment' opposition to new ideas. Here his general assertion that breakthroughs made in works like graduate dissertations can often be unreasonably resisted by examiners affronted by the demolition of their own ideas tallies, sadly, with my own close observance of, and involvement in, one (now late) friend's doctoral work in mathematically based experimental psychology. But another specific case of alleged establishment resistance he raises, that to the idea of plate tectonics, seems to me likely to be at least partly wrong. I knew its principal creator, the late Drum Matthews (working with Fred Vine), well. He was in my own college and, for a time I went climbing with him, and we talked about it. My memory is that once a technical struggle with the underwater magnetometer produced records that clearly showed the multiple 'mirrored' bands of reversing thermoremanent magnetism on either side

of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, making the case was in scientific terms a pushover, or at least among the local scientific community. I recall when he first showed them to me, I said "So Wegener wins after all?" All he did at that point was give a momentary grin. It was obvious. Now, I would not claim to know the whole story, but I mention these points to show that when the book moves away from the tightly controlled analysis of ancient thought, there is a risk that some statements in the codas are not comparably solidly based, and so at times open to challenge.

The third chapter is on "Audiences and Assemblies," a subject familiar to students of Western antiquity but little studied with respect to ancient China. Lloyd argues that the vigorous debates in Greek city-state assemblies and law-courts were models that strongly influenced the style of other domains of intellectual activity, and I think most scholars would agree with this. On the other hand, his treatment of this important topic in ancient China tends to convey the impression that most significant exchanges were those between two individuals, often a superior and an inferior, or within small restricted groups like a master and his disciples. While this contrast captures a significant part of the truth, and, as Lloyd correctly points out, superiors normally retained an absolute right as regards deciding what action should be taken as a result of discussions, his pages on this topic say nothing about such major events as the occasional imperially convened conferences of scholars from all over the empire to debate matters of both ideological and practical significance. The two most famous examples were the meeting called to debate state monopolies, and a range of other policies, between ministers and Confucians in 81 BC, recorded in *The Discussions on Salt and Iron* (*Yantielun* 鹽鐵論), and that in 79 AD between Confucian scholars arguing over cosmology, human nature and proper human behaviour, and the Confucian Classics, usually referred to as *The Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall* (*Baihu tong* 白虎通). Our records are too close to the nature of the formally approved minutes for us to reconstruct with certainty the real style of the debates, both the live contributions and the responses of the audience. I would nonetheless have liked to hear what he has to say on the socio-intellectual character of these occasions. Overall, though, Lloyd's singling out of this topic as needing deeper thought deserves a warm welcome.

As an addendum we may note that in both cultures the writing of letters, though not mentioned in this chapter, which tends to privilege oral interpersonal communication (pp. 72-73), could play a key role, though in ancient times perhaps more so in the Greek-speaking world. Archimedes in Syracuse, for example, had so few friends capable of understanding, and so discussing, his work that he mostly communicated it by letters to a select handful in Samos and Alexandria. See Netz, *The Works of Archi-*

*medes*, I (2004), p. 13, on Conon, Eratosthenes, and Dositheus. There are records from China by early mediaeval times showing letters perhaps playing a somewhat comparable role in Buddhism. See Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, p. 226, on the letters from Huiyan to Kumârajīva.

The fourth chapter, entitled "Delusions of Invulnerability," is on the effort by philosophers to find a consoling psychological defence, through metaphysics, against the evident weakness of human beings in the face of greater forces, both imagined, like the gods, and real, like diseases, natural disasters, and tyrants. Lloyd says that, unlike the majority of ancient Greeks, the ancient Chinese were not haunted by the fear of the envy or malice (*phthonos*) of the gods. True, but the early Chinese were at times afflicted by the fear that they were being punished by Heaven, typically by natural disasters, for some crime they had committed but of which they were unaware. An example is Ode 258 (Yun Han 雲 漢) in Karlgren's translation of the *Book of Odes*: "Heaven sends down death and disorder, famine comes repeatedly; there are no spirits to which sacrifices are not made, we do not grudge those victims; ... why does no [spirit] listen to us?" In later times the question of the justice of Heaven was not, perhaps, a common theme, but it was a persistent one. In the Chinese case this issue was also probably most often posed in collective terms, whereas the Greeks seem to have seen disaster more often as an individual matter, brought on by such conditions as excessive wealth or undeserved unbroken happiness. The familiar tale of Baucis and Philemon (at least as retailed by Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII, 616-724) shows, however, that it was thought that divine punishment might also fall on impious communities (as Lloyd also notes later on page 116), and that the modest and pious were sometimes *not* the victims of *phthonos*, but the recipients of the gods' kindness. This is broadly in line with Hesiod, in spite of the grim picture he paints at times of human relations with the gods: on the whole Zeus rewarded the good, and punished the bad, though at times the evil of a single person or ruler might bring down vengeance on an entire community. See *Works and Days*, 225-247, 256-262.

Lloyd gives an excellent account of the three main approaches taken to the achievement of *ataraxia*, a state of immutable internal tranquillity: the Epicurean, the Stoic, and the Sceptical. The first was based on achieving a clear-eyed understanding of the nature of the physical world, the second on internal self-cultivation to attain a virtue that conferred an unbreakable indifference to the normal temptations and terrors of human experience, and the third, though it came in a variety of forms, on the realization of the ultimate unprovability of any proposition (almost a kind of ancient Zen). What would have been fascinating here would have been the author's view on Bryant's suggestion in his *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece* (1996) that these were the result of the

individual's loss of virtually any power to determine his, and his community's, existence once the small-scaled world of the *polis* had been swept away by the great empires of Macedon and then Rome. (See the slightly different perspective adopted on p. 149.)

The closest parallel in ancient China to these Hellenistic quests for *ataraxia* are to be found in the *Zhuangzi*, and if there is any real fault to be found with Lloyd's quick-witted and challenging book it is that he fails to come to terms with this complex layered text and the elusive thinker who inspired it, but in all probability did not write it, or much of it. Zhuangzi (if we may for a moment treat him as a person) was a past master at logic, who used logic to destroy logic, hence in a Chinese way a Sceptic. Metaphysically, though, he was a sort of monist who saw the universe as consisting of the endless sequences of the transformation of things (*wuhua* 物化), and release from delusion and anxiety as coming from the individual's enlightened acceptance of his fate as a ever-varying participant in the ever-altering Great All.

For those interested in the history of science, the relative dismissal in this chapter of the atomism and other ideas of the Epicureans (which most of us know best at second hand through Lucretius) is perhaps the key issue. Lloyd says on page 99 that "they did not engage in the type of research in astronomy, optics, harmonics, geography and medicine that some of their contemporaries were undertaking." This is both true in a literal sense (so far as we know from the patchy documentation) and yet, I would feel, at the same time a serious underestimation of their importance. As Lucio Russo points out on page 23 of his *The Forgotten Revolution* (2004) Epicurean explanation of phenomena by means of non-observable entities was a crucial strategic step towards the construction of scientific theories; and, in addition, the idea of mechanistic determination seems to go back to Leucippus, and the distinction between primary and secondary qualities to Democritus. Lucretius was also first surviving author to state, and to justify in outline terms, the principle of the conservation of mass (*De rerum natura*, II.294-296). It has rightly been pointed out (as by Barbour in *The Discovery of Dynamics* (2001), pp. 70-71) that there was a serious gap in ancient atomic theory, namely the absence of a precise explanation of how the atoms in general moved. I suspect, nonetheless, that there may be something valid in Serres' suggestion that the atomists' conception of motion was based on their attentive observation of the flow of water (*La naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce – fleuves et turbulences* (1977), *passim*), even if many of his other remarks do not inspire much confidence. It was, however, largely from Lucretius via Gassendi (1592-1655) that the ultimately scientifically fruitful inspiration of ancient atomism entered early modern European physics. A more

detailed discussion of issues such as these would have been well worth having.

The fifth chapter, on “The Frailties of Justice,” shows that by the time of the empires the operation of a bureaucratically based legal system had tended in both cultures, from rather different starting-points, towards structures that were not radically dissimilar from each other. Lloyd also makes the point that, starting in the *polis* period, the increasing frequency with which new laws were made in the Greek world tended to undermine popular faith in the ultimate as opposed to the contingent validity of the laws (p.119). The same was surely true of the pragmatic, and often drastic, legal innovations of the so-called ‘methods school’ or ‘legalists’ (*fajia* 法家) in late pre-imperial China, though I don’t think that this particular point is explicitly made.

It is when the analysis moves on to conceptions that the issues become both more interesting and more difficult. Lloyd points out that the many-meaninged terms *dikê/dikaia* and *themis* that we tend to think of as having a sense close to ‘justice’ originally had the sense more of ‘locally approved customary usage’. Though the material in the *Analects* was presumably at least in part selected to make a Confucian ideological point, the existence in ancient China of a somewhat analogous variegated situation is hinted at by the familiar story of the so-called ‘Duke’ of She and Confucius, which Lloyd mentions on page 133. The ‘Duke’ boasted that “in his community (*dang* 黨)” one of his subjects, ‘a certain Upright Gong’ (直躬者) had borne witness against his own father for stealing a sheep. Confucius replied, “In my community (*dang* 黨) the upright men are of quite another sort. A father will screen his son, and a son his father – which incidentally does involve a sort of uprightness 直在其中矣.” (*Analects*, XIII.18, trad. Waley, adjuv. M. E.). In early imperial China, already more ideologically homogenized, there was a legally prescribed death penalty for sons accusing their fathers, as illustrated by the execution of Prince Shuang in 123 BC (Ch’ü T’ung-tsu, *Law and Society in Traditional China* (1961), p. 72), a penalty relaxed slightly only in late-imperial times if the accusation were proven true. This is a tentative suggestion, it should be added. Professor Lloyd uses the reference, quite validly, to indicate the Chinese concern with the differing legal rights and obligations of those in differing social roles.

There is the usual trouble with some of the key Chinese terms, notably *yi* 義 traditionally translated, as here by the author, as ‘righteousness’, and *ren* 仁 traditionally translated as ‘humaneness’, as here, or ‘benevolence’. Never expect two sinologists to agree completely on how to render such words, so I will merely note here that I would argue, personally, that *yi* is above all a term indicating ‘an action or attitude that transcends particular links between kin and friends to focus on what essentially mat-

ters to society as wider whole', and that *ren* is more accurately rendered as 'a compassionate sensitive awareness of another person's state of mind or feeling' (as hinted at by one of the Han-dynasty meanings of its negative, *buren* 不仁, namely 'numb').

Perhaps a more interesting question is, Did ancient China ever develop any conception that approximated to the ancient Greek idea of 'justice' in its more developed forms? More specifically, were China's dominant ideas in this domain virtually all focussed exclusively on socio-political system maintenance? The underlying defining metaphor, if one may so put it, seems to have been that the political-cultural system under a supreme ruler was like the constant rotation of the heavens, or as the ancient cliché expressed it *Tianjing Diyi* 天經地義, which roughly translates as something like 'the constancy of Heaven and the public-spiritedness of Earth' and usually glossed as indicating the immutability of ritually or morally correct behaviour (*Cihai* encyclopaedia (1947), p. 366). Put another way, translating the Latin tag *fiat justitia ruat cælum*, i.e. 'let justice be done and [if need be] let Heaven fall,' into meaningful classical Chinese seems impossible. Under such assumptions the maintenance of the system was, virtually by definition, superior to any other aim for any course of action. This then led to the classic Chinese conundrum, Did success in and of itself justify a change of the ruling or dynasty, or, if not, what did?—The well-known question of the Mandate of Heaven. But this is not discussed.

The sixth chapter is on "Models for Living." It has several striking aperçus, such as the contrast between, on the Greek side, the labours of Herakles and the technical contributions of Prometheus to humankind on the one hand, the former all of immense difficulty but of little social benefit, and the latter, though socially beneficial, rewarded by Zeus with the perpetually renewed torture of the disobedient donor, and, on the other hand on the Chinese side, a multi-millennial gratitude to the legendary or semi-legendary sage-kings whose wisdom and unflinching labours had bestowed on them houses, farming, flood control, and indeed writing and much else besides. But it is not clear if the main focus in the chapter is on what one *should* do, or on what one would be *proud* to have done if the opportunity presented itself and one was up to the occasion. In both cultures the answers to the first case were highly dependent on status, gender, and age. Thus in China, the most basic obligations were the proper observance of the relationships called the 'Three Net-ropes' (*san'gang* 三綱), the prescribed asymmetrical powers and duties between husbands and wives, fathers and sons, and older and elder brothers, a key point, even if not a very interesting one, but not mentioned by Lloyd. It was expressed in various didactic works of which the *Xiaojing* 孝經, the *Classic of Filial Piety*, or, better, 'obedience', is the



best-known. Though some Chinese virtues shifted slightly, that of loyalty (*zhong* 忠) seemingly changing from an early reciprocal relationship (in the *Shujing* 書經 period) between leader and led to a classical and post-classical unilateral obligation on the part of the inferior, in the Greek world, the desiderata were more varied, and changed more across time. I would instance Bryant's *Moral Codes*, already mentioned, as a good preliminary guide to the latter, not wishing to attempt an improvised summary here. As to doing the second—identifying the distinctive sources of well-deserved pride—it would require, again in both cultures, a re-reading of biographies, epitaphs, and funerary inscriptions subtle enough, where necessary, to distinguish between real motivation, publicly declared motivation, and posthumously attributed motivation—if this is not an impossible demand. As is well known, Aeschylus's gravestone inscription spoke *only* of his military service at Marathon and by implication elsewhere (he was also at Salamis), but later memorial poems do not mention it, and tend instead to concentrate on the plays (Loeb: *Aeschylus* I, xxii-xxiii; *Gr. Anthology* II, #39 and #411, but not #40).

In sum, *Delusions of Invulnerability* is a remarkably rich little book for its scant 164 pages of text, and raises many interesting questions in new forms. The answers are drawn from a depth of learning that most of us can only envy and admire; and with some brilliant one-liners. Above all it should prove an invigorating stimulus for those who wish to approach these subjects from a fresh perspective. If it has any limitations, it is that—perhaps understandably, given its restricted format relative to the wide domain that it surveys—a handful of the analyses are at best suggestive rather than carried through to demonstrated conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank Professor Hans Ulrich Vogel and Professor Joseph Bryant most warmly for their enriching comments on the first draft of this review.