LSE Research Online

Leigh K. Jenco

Making the political: founding and action in the political theory of Zhang Shizhao

Book section

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

Introduction

1 | *Making the political*

How can our shared, humanly created environment be effectively transformed – to make it better, less confining, more tractable to our control? Is it even possible to change, in a spontaneous and non-coerced way, the social and political world we inhabit? If we are unwilling to accept coercive impositions by the state or the powers that be, it seems that only public or collective action has such a capacity. After all, when we as individuals act for social change, we usually do so within the parameters of an already existing set of institutional arrangements, histories, and social understandings, created and animated largely through the work of others. Innovation is an extension of these socially constituted practices, whose contradictions, gaps, or inadequacies engender change yet persist in constraining it. Hanna Pitkin echoes the beliefs of many when she notes that "for most of us . . . private, isolated acts will make little difference" for public life unless taken in concert with others.[1] Such intuitions find their most prominent institutionalization in democratic regimes, which for both normative and practical reasons facilitate collective as opposed to bureaucratic, dictatorial, or unilateral action. Participatory acts in public arenas – such as voting, collective protest, the exercise of and respect for free expression – coordinate a plurality of individual actions and authorize collective interventions in shared space.

But how, then, do new political movements get off the ground, from the ground? Can ordinary individuals act for change, even if no one has enough already in common to make those actions effective or legitimate? These are not simply academic considerations. Knowing what role individuals can play in collective transformation is crucial for those many instances where collective action is simply not forthcoming, or where social movements have not yet materialized. In many ways, this dilemma is reducible to that of political founding, which asks how we

[1] Pitkin, "Justice," 344.

can take specifically *political* action if no political community has yet emerged – indeed, if no "we" yet exists even to wonder about the question. Both cases seem to require the intervention of an innovator, a founding father (or mother) who can call into being the community that underwrites political actions as much as political regimes. Yet these interventions are paradoxical – because "those who get together to constitute a new government are themselves unconstitutional."[2] The entire community must somehow authorize its own being before any individual or small group of individuals can act upon, through, or in it – even as it is surely the community and its practices that make available all spaces for meaningful action.

Legitimacy is not the only paradox here, however. Consider those cases where the very communities that foster and make possible necessary political practices may be eroding, or where those persons inscribed as "citizens" in the law nevertheless lack the social practices, mutual recognition, and vocabulary that make "citizenship" meaningful. If democracy or liberalism or any other regime is simply not working – what then? Is top-down imposition the only alternative? This more difficult question of social change was faced by several generations of reformers in China around the turn of the twentieth century. For these radical thinkers, democracy and other forms of "Western" government held the promise of modernizing the imperial state, enlivening its masses, and making those in power accountable to those they governed – but fulfilling such a promise required that they succeed in building a new kind of regime with no precedent in Chinese history. China at that time was still a monarchy, ruled from the center by the emperor and his legions of trained bureaucrats. The emperor certainly enjoyed the putative authority to impose his sovereign will on the Chinese people, but to the surprise of many reformers, imperial command was not enough to make these Western institutions work. A republican convention and the nominal establishment of a constitutional order after the emperor was deposed in 1911 were equally ineffective, even as China grew weak in the face of foreign incursion, domestic unrest, and national debt.

At this time of unprecedented crisis, one influential thinker by the name of Zhang Shizhao (1881–1973) explored the possibility that individual action may be capable of bringing about a democratic regime

---

[2] Arendt, *On Revolution*, 176.

where one does not exist, and has never existed. He does not do so, however, by presuming that individuals are somehow ontologically prior to their political communities, that they can mimic benevolent dictators and force their view on others, or that they can act in an autonomous and unencumbered way. Instead, he reinterprets the sites and actions of political founding (*li guo*). For Zhang, founding does not mean the imposition of a sovereign will on an abject people, but the gradual reorientation of personal practices and outlooks toward unprecedented, society-wide ways of living and governing. This reformulation throws light not only on founding acts, but on all acts of everyday innovation that require, even as they call into being, an entire community to ensure their eventual execution. Theorizing within a tradition and to an audience that did not produce democratic practices like those in contemporary Britain and America, Zhang's task extends beyond simply identifying how a people (*min*) can call into being its government (*zheng*).[3] Zhang also tries to explain how the individual self (*ji* or *wo*) can perform both the constituting of the people and the constituting of the government – indeed, *must* perform it, given the absence of widespread agreement and of shared democratic norms.

Zhang's efforts do not deny the efficacy and importance of collective action; they simply draw attention to the steps that take place before individual visions of change may culminate in collective support – whether as a means of invigorating public space, changing shared environments, or building institutions where none existed before. In other words, these steps do not assume but actually "*make* the political" (*wei zheng*), as Zhang phrases it,[4] under conditions that are deeply fragmented and (to many of Zhang's readers) completely hopeless. He must explain to his dispirited contemporaries how the action of individuals can be effective in founding a new self-ruling regime – despite the fact that no obvious community existed in China at that time to underwrite the novel Western practice of democratic citizenship.

In the mature democracies of northern Europe and North America, such problems are rarely discussed as theoretical issues because so many of the necessary institutions and shared practices of democracy

[3] This is the definition of constitutional founding offered by Arendt, *On Revolution*, 145.
[4] See Appendix A for detailed discussions of how I translate this and other key terms in Zhang's work.

are already there. They have existed, in Edmund Burke's words, since "time out of mind." Nothing as dramatic as founding is necessary, because peaceful, incremental changes spring satisfactorily enough from already existing or historically accessible practices and institutions. In these societies, it is easy to see political innovations as circular, as many recent political theorists have: regimes inflect the very citizens that create them, novel actions interpellate the very actors that initiate them.[5] The same cannot be said, however, for many other parts of the world – including former European colonies whose people often express a desire for democracy, but whose governments remain unable or unwilling to implement it. Indeed, I would argue the same cannot be said for *any* instance of innovation under conditions of fragmentation, social opposition, or even widespread disbelief in its possibility. Zhang's work, then, offers a rare look at the not-so-rare problem of how we as individuals innovate politically, before a critical mass of persons has coalesced around a shared goal or developed awareness of themselves as a community capable of taking action. In the process of explaining what such innovation entails and what it can and cannot assume, Zhang's work highlights important blindnesses in many accounts of political agency offered both by his peers and by contemporary political theorists. More importantly, he also offers a constructive path forward for political action that aims for the not-yet without being unduly constrained by the already existing. He suggests ways for individuals to act politically, *before* the political domains that foster such actions are conceptually present in the minds of those who constitute them.

Thinking from the early Republic: some methodological considerations on "comparative political theory"

Zhang put forward this vision for diffuse and incremental change at a time when Chinese politics was growing increasingly and intractably radical. In his influential political journal *The Tiger* (*Jiayin zazhi*), Zhang drew on his exceptional conversance with both British political theory and the Chinese intellectual tradition to defend China's nascent republican order. More importantly, he produced novel explanations

---

[5] See, e.g., Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation"; Olson, "Paradoxes"; Frank, *Democracy of Distinction*.

for the theoretical and personal, as well as political, advancements required for a functional self-ruling polity. Yet Zhang's ideological dissonance with contemporary and later twentieth-century Chinese politics has made him difficult to fit into any teleology for modern Chinese intellectual history, which often focuses on explaining the rise of revolutionary communism and ignores "failed" attempts to advance moderate reform. Perhaps for this reason, much post-1949 secondary literature on modern China has neglected Zhang – yet this marked absence is belied by his central presence in earlier accounts of political thought and history.[6]

Revised projections of China's historical path are lending Zhang's thought new relevance, however. As "socialism with Chinese characteristics" replaces Maoist visions of ongoing revolution, the reform movements of the late Qing and early Republican periods (dating roughly from the mid-nineteenth century to 1919) – once seen as distracting way stations on China's march to communism – are now seen to share significant continuities with the dilemmas of the present.[7] With this rethinking of history has come a new valuation of the role played by moderate reformers such as Zhang in China's modernization process.[8] His calls for moderate constitutionalism, his obvious importance in influencing early twentieth-century political debate, and his skillful blending of Western and Chinese political theories has recently enjoyed a considerable revival among Sinophone scholars, especially since the publication of his ten-volume *Collected Works* (*Zhang Shizhao quanji*) in the year 2000.[9]

This book, the first extended study of Zhang Shizhao in any Western language, continues this ongoing reflection on Zhang's importance by demonstrating the relevance of his thought to both modern and contemporary debates on democracy and political action. It might seem odd to dedicate an entire book to the work of someone so unfamiliar to Anglophone audiences, but there are multiple good reasons for

---

[6] Chang Naide, for example, devotes almost an entire chapter of his less than two-hundred page comprehensive overview of the entire history of Chinese thought, *Zhongguo sixiang xiao shi*, to Zhang Shizhao and *The Tiger*. See the next chapter for more discussion of Zhang's life and influence.

[7] Wang, "Zonglun"; Karl and Zarrow, *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period*.

[8] E.g., Huang, *Yi ge bei fangqi de xuanze*; Gao, *Tiaoshi de zhihui*, 2–6.

[9] Bai, *Zhang Shizhao zhuan*; Guo, *Kuanrong yu tuoxie*; Zou, *Zhang Shizhao shehui zhengzhi sixiang*.

doing so besides Zhang's obvious influence on past and contemporary Chinese thought. Most centrally, Zhang's work is fundamentally concerned with articulating and answering fundamental questions about the nature of political life, and thus with making defensible claims that concern – in addition to the carefully argued specifics of his reform program – the causal mechanisms of social change and the relation of those mechanisms to the kind of politics he advocated. This means that he is a political theorist whose work offers insight into dilemmas common to a wide variety of societies – not only those struggling to establish permanent liberal-democratic institutions, such as in Thailand and East Timor, but also those in the contemporary West who have forgotten the challenges of this process.[10] His outstanding conversance with multiple thought traditions, including classical and imperial Chinese philosophy as well as British and European thought, equips him to undertake this challenge with insight and sensitivity. Indeed, given the current focus of political and social theory on transcultural learning in an age of globalization, Zhang's work offers unusually rich theoretical resources for negotiating this terrain.

For these reasons, the point of this book is not really to compare Zhang's work with that of particular Western thinkers, so much as to explore and assess the questions Zhang and his interlocutors articulate. I do this by tying these questions to ongoing, sometimes millennia-old Chinese debates, such as those concerning the role of institutions in political transformation, as well as to past and present Euro-American discussions that interrogate or amplify Zhang's conclusions, such as recent discussions about the implications for democratic politics of founding and innovation. Acutely sensitive to Roxanne Euben's insight that all theory is grounded in some form of comparison, however, I acknowledge those implicit comparisons on which any translator of languages and ideas must draw in order to render her words and arguments meaningful. My own representation of Zhang's arguments in English, I realize, are part of what "constitute[s] the very conditions of intelligibility across difference."[11] This process of translation is at the same time a process of interpellation and transformation, leading

---

[10] On the paradoxes of constitutional founding in Southeast Asian states that cannot presuppose liberal-democratic institutions, see Ramraj, "The Emergency Powers Paradox."

[11] Euben, *Journeys*, 16.

many comparative political theorists to characterize it as a "conversa-tion" or "dialogue" in which differently situated interlocutors address each others as equals rather than as radical "others."[12]

Despite this obvious debt to comparative method, here and in other work I resist the construction of a "comparative" political theory. My resistance stems mainly from the tendency of comparison to preclude the development (if not the examination) of arguments and viewpoints from outside those texts and debates that have marked Euro-American discourse in political theory for the past century. Comparison tends to draw attention only to those aspects of other thought traditions that exhibit obvious resonance with Western categories, rendering non-Western ideas, thinkers, and traditions interesting as case stud-ies but not themselves the domain of theorizing. The problem that troubles me here is not the often-noted one in which the construction of markers of difference and sameness enables a culturally imperialis-tic project. Much of comparative political theory takes such an insight to be a starting point, and its practitioners have already elaborated quite sophisticated theoretical models to ward off or avoid such a pos-sibility. I am more concerned that the acknowledgment of inevitable cultural embeddedness – encouraged in the wake of Orientalist agen-das that seek to exploit rather than understand the cultural "Other" – authorizes attempts at cross-cultural borrowing much less radical than they can be. Postcolonial scholars and the comparative political theo-rists influenced by them present Western traditions as inevitable aspects of all theorizing, in the process suppressing or ignoring the indigenous traditions of inquiry that have motivated political thinking in diverse places and times.[13] The presumption is that although we can, through whatever model of interaction, come to understand insiders' points of view, those of us situated on the "outside" are unable to let the foundational premises of "insiders" fully persuade us. The best we can do is recognize that and how particular arguments make sense for the insiders making them, or perhaps work toward a dialogically mediated perspective in which the mutually intelligible insights of both sides are combined. In no case can these so-called insider perspectives ever serve

---

[12] E.g., Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*; Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism.*
[13] E.g., Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*. I discuss this critique in more detail in Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?"

as building blocks for a political theory along lines that draw more from "them" than from "us."

Yet if we in American and European academic settings wish to make our thinking about politics less Eurocentric and more capable of comprehending the variety of political experiences across the globe, simply recognizing each other as equals offers few constructive guidelines; staging a unilaterally initiated "conversation" between two situated interlocutors only reinforces the very boundaries that cross-cultural research has the potential to broach so fruitfully. It seems to me that the best way to affirm the global diffusion of political theorizing is to act upon it: to develop *from* alternative traditions and *in* alternative modes new possibilities for thinking critically about politics. That way, we do not see political theory as an activity that coheres on the basis of "shared dilemmas and questions"[14] – which, not surprisingly, are usually identified as those that are already articulated within the "Western canon" – but as an enterprise designed to acquire new conceptual and practical resources which can themselves prompt entirely unanticipated questions and answers. Keeping the focus on Zhang and his interlocutors, then, helps me bring to light certain contemporary Chinese debates that hold meaning for broader audiences, rather than returning always to parochial Western ones.

My attempt somewhat resembles the application to political theory of what historian Alexander Woodside calls "appropriating Occidentialism," which encourages West-based historians to examine Western history self-reflexively through the eyes of non-Westerners, rather than only the other way around. Yet even Woodside's call simply asks us to render the practice of history "appropriate to the study of the huge storehouse of Chinese historical experiences,"[15] much as Euben suggests that we "introduce non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about living together."[16] The goal for both remains merely to craft a theory adequate to address a wider set of evidence. In contrast, my method hopes to view and select evidence through the lens of a different theory, and from there rethink the project at hand in a variety of new settings.

---

[14] Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 10; see also Salkever and Nylan, "Comparative Political Philosophy."
[15] Woodside, "Reconciling the Chinese and Western Theory Worlds," 121.
[16] Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror*, 9.

Obviously, any reader brings her own prejudices to the texts she analyzes, and my reading of Zhang's work is undoubtedly influenced by personal experience. But claiming that such prejudices inhibit a successful reconstruction of the arguments Zhang put forward is to court a strange double standard about the capacity of political theorists to learn anything from the texts they study. That is, the ability of political theorists to draw out compelling arguments from historically situated canonical texts remains – pace Quentin Skinner – a contested but often utilized conclusion of the subfield. That Zhang is Chinese and I am not has little to do with my own ability to extract from his work sophisticated theoretical arguments, given adequate grounding in the language and discourse of that time and place.[17] It may be possible to formulate an argument that cultural versus historical differences demand alternative modes of engagement, but until that time I will press forward on the assumption that, given proper training, the political thinking of early Republican China is as accessible to me as is that of any other time and place, whether ancient Athens or Florentine Italy.

In any case, the interpretive insights to be gained by reading Zhang as an agent of theory and not simply of history are considerable enough to broach such risks. While historians have exhaustively documented the intellectual debates of the Republican era, they rarely consider the simple fact that these thinkers were, in Chang Hao's words, "speaking both to the historical and to the existential situations."[18] Seeing them only as historical actors cannot adequately comprehend the nature of persistent dilemmas that confronted them on the level of theory. In fact, taking Zhang seriously as a theoretical, and not merely historical, agent allows me to analyze in a deeper way than otherwise possible the major issues that continue to animate modern Chinese political thought and practice – including the relationship of intellectuals to the masses, the role of government in social transformation, and the articulation of political action and authority in a post-dynastic Confucian system.

---

[17] What constitutes "adequate" grounding is, of course, a point of debate, but this remains as true for the interpretation of canonical Western texts as it does for interpretation across perceived cultural boundaries. My point is simply that if we accept the possibility of such historical reconstruction given temporal distance, we should have no problem accepting the possibility of cultural reconstruction given spatial distance. I am indebted to Mark Bevir for clarifying this similarity for me.

[18] Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, 8.

In this book, I therefore begin – though I do not end – with a set of theoretical problems articulated by Zhang and his fellow intellectuals in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China, insisting always that their concerns reach beyond their immediate historical and cultural contexts even as their and my arguments draw important resources from them. In other words, I do not wish to contribute to Western debates by critiquing them from "the outside," so much as to sustain an argument from Chinese thought, with implications for contemporary Chinese as much as Western concerns.

Founding and paradox

Zhang was not the only person in China at the time to realize that community creation was the first order of business for any successful reform, but he was among the few to recognize the close relationship of self-aware communities with specifically political institutions. Political education – not only for the largely illiterate Chinese masses but also for the educated elites who equally lacked any real experience of governing democratically – was a primary concern of most reformers in the years following the Qing deposal in 1911. Liang Qichao (1873–1929), one of the most influential intellectuals and social activists in modern China, advocated mass education campaigns. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), leader of the revolutionary forces that toppled the Qing dynasty, demanded political tutelage under party leadership. Yuan Shikai (1859–1916), elected president of the newly declared Republic, recommended (and after only a short term in office, attempted to install) benevolent dictatorship.

Zhang dismissed these proposed solutions as not only elitist, and therefore threats to both the practice and foundation of democracy, but also ineffective. After spending the early years of his public career promoting liberal institutions – like constitutions, parliaments, and civil liberties – that persistently failed to materialize, Zhang came to identify the problem of founding as a problem of the right people: "As I see it, making the political lies in people; those people exist and the political flourishes" (ZQJ 5). Although here Zhang uses the word for "persons" (*ren*) rather than for "the people" in the sense of masses (*min* or *pingmin*), he does not expect elites alone to do this work – even if, by writing in classical rather than vernacular Chinese, they were the audience he primarily addressed. To Zhang, political

regimes meant nothing without the commitment of the people who both founded and sustained them; as later chapters will demonstrate, this included people at all levels of society, and of all degrees of talent (see, e.g., ZQJ 307). A study abroad in England convinced him, in fact, that these specific, diffuse capacities of everyone in society could be encouraged by the proper institutions, which he argued did matter to the kinds of action people can and will take, and to how those actions affect other members of the political community (ZQJ 430).

With these observations, Zhang pictures the relationship between persons and laws as circular, but this circularity only underscores the indeterminacy of beginning: where do these people who can found and sustain democratic regimes come from? Social-contract theorists, such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, often paradoxically hold that the necessary character traits – civic involvement, participatory capacity – exist prior to membership in a political community (as in John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*), or can be instilled by a benevolent lawgiver (as in Rousseau's *On the Social Contract*).[19] Recently, however, a variety of democratic theorists – including Hannah Arendt, William Connolly, Sheldon Wolin, Bonnie Honig, and Hanna Pitkin – have noted the rich, mutually constitutive relationship between the individual and the community to remind us that no demiurgic founder can definitively reshape the face of society or politics. It is only the political community itself, in a series of incremental, unpredictable steps, that can noncoercively effect positive social and political transformation. In this view, neither persons nor laws are ontologically or historically prior to each other. In Bonnie Honig's words, the founding "quandary of chicken-and-egg (which comes first, good people or good law?) takes off and attaches to democratic politics more generally." As she points out,

Every day, after all, new citizens are born, and still others emigrate into established regimes. Every day, already socialized citizens mistake, depart from, or simply differ about the commitments of democratic citizenship. Every day, democracies resocialize, capture, or reinterpellate citizens into

---

[19] More recently, John Rawls, in *Political Liberalism*, has appealed to Kantian universal reason to make foundational decisions about the obligations and goals of political membership before the community is even formed – overtly displacing the liberal rights and democratic decision-making the polity is meant to champion.

their political institutions and culture in ways those citizens do not freely will, nor could they.[20]

This process of ongoing, mutual constitution renders founding acts merely symbolic: no act, however novel, is not already somehow conditioned by the community in which it must take place. A founder may "remain the subject, the 'hero,' of the story," but he or she is never "unequivocally . . . the author of its eventual outcome."[21] This is because it is assumed that the world – any world – into which a founding act is inserted necessarily comprises an "always-already" existing community, that executes, interprets, and inflects action taken to change it.[22] Foundings – and political innovation in general – are better described as interventions that contribute to, but do not masterfully control, the inauguration of new political movements, ideas, and conditions.

These readings of founding offer crucial insights into the nature of action in democratic regimes, explaining that the novelty of founding is not a characteristic exclusive to it. Broadly diffuse interventions in everyday political life, by ordinary citizens, inaugurate new lines of action for the entire community, and for that reason are analogous in both form and scope to initial, community-establishing acts. But it is not clear that all founding acts are simply interventions in some existing set of arrangements – what Hanna Pitkin, following Hannah Arendt, has called the "always-already" available resources for inaugurating and sustaining action in public.[23] Zhang's dilemma – indeed, the dilemma of many democratizing societies all over the world – demonstrates that this assumption is not universally applicable. The China of Zhang's time did have some functional social organizations, including trade guilds, native-place associations, and secret societies. Yet Chinese society did not possess a cache of relevant sentiment that was already available for invocation by the theorist or activist. Zhang's question remains: how may individuals and small groups effectively build a political regime or set of institutions, when that task demands the coordination of an entire society around a particular set of norms that are not yet shared, or even widely understood? Only in mature self-ruling polities can political self-sufficiency be endowed by an already

[20] Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation," 3.
[21] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 185.
[22] Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob*, 282.   [23] Ibid.

existing historical acceptance of the regime, and only from the perspective of Euro-Atlantic political experience can such a view ever make sense. Founding on this account loses the paradoxical edge that made it useful as a model for sustaining action in the first place, and becomes simply another instance in which Western political theory solves problems only for itself.

Zhang's founding narrative turns instead to investigating how the internal struggle of individuals can be influenced by external environments without being reduced to them, paying special attention to the incremental but nevertheless necessary steps that must be taken before collective action around a shared goal is even possible. In reformulating the question of founding, Zhang does not assume the imminent arrival of a benevolent lawgiver, the possibility of spontaneous coalescence, or the reality of an already existing community. He asks, rather, how may individuals act efficaciously and noncoercively, before collective action with others on however minimal a shared goal is likely or possible? He theorizes multiple steps in this bootstrapping process – from self-awareness, to local engagement of one's talents, to intersubjective negotiation or "accommodation" – each of which turns on resonance and exemplariness rather than force or persuasion as its central mechanism of change. Part of what makes this approach to social transformation credible is the very social embeddedness of individuals: existing within social and familial (if not political) frameworks, the work of singular actors can build to dramatic effect simply by influencing those closest to them. Zhang's dilemma, however, is precisely that these already existing relationships do *not* transparently and self-evidently translate into the kinds of political practice that make democratic, constitutional government possible. The chapters that follow explain how Zhang elaborates this vision of founding in terms of meaningful practice, how he extends the logic of his founding to apply to acts that sustain as much as inaugurate, and how he reads interpersonal accommodation of differences as integral to building a coherent yet internally diverse polity.

Chapter summary

Zhang confronts his task of founding by negotiating a series of paradoxes: which comes first, people committed to self-rule or the institutions that make self-rule possible? Why was elite-led, top-down reform

not effective in fostering democratic practice among China's masses – and what was the alternative? How can taking political action make sense as "political" *before* the communities that could underwrite or legitimate such action exist? Part I of this book, comprising this chapter and the next, provides the historical and theoretical context that for Zhang brought these questions to the fore. Chapter 2 delves into the specific influences and dilemmas that shaped Zhang's intellectual trajectory, singling out his extensive work in his political journal *The Tiger* for its historical significance as well as it unusual intellectual heft. In that chapter I also explain why Zhang believed careful attention to "theory" (*lilun*) could help to solve the practical dilemmas China faced. I divide my subsequent discussion of Zhang's political theory into two parts that make up the remaining sections of this book. Part II, "Founding," explores the key concepts and debates that mediate Zhang's thoughts on how to establish a self-ruling community. These chapters construct a conceptual frame through which the specific practices examined in Part III, "Action," can be construed as both political and effective given these founding dilemmas.

Chapter 3, "The founding paradox," begins Part II. There I show how Zhang worked to resolve the paradoxes of founding by drawing on a powerful repository of both Chinese and Western resources. Bringing Rousseau's *Social Contract* to bear on the story of political origins in the neo-Confucian text *Doctrine of the Mean*, Zhang suggests that an ongoing process of gradually increasing resonance, rather than a moment of instantaneous consent, offers a more realistic but equally noncoercive model for political founding. Zhang's paradoxical interventions here are largely framed by an ongoing, two-millennia-old Chinese debate over institution-based (*fazhi*) versus person-based (*renzhi*) reform, which I analyze in detail in Chapter 4, "Rule by man and rule by law." Although Zhang is best known – both among his contemporaries and among modern-day Chinese scholars – for being an uncompromising advocate of "rule by law," I argue that he in fact occupies a more ambivalent position that reflects the nuances of his founding narrative. In imperial times, "rule by man" indicated a faith that the virtuousness of the persons in power – the emperor and the scholar-officials or "literati" (*shi*) that ran his bureaucracy – determined the quality of the government. In the tentatively democratic discourses that circulated in the early Republic, rule by man came to be identified with mass education campaigns designed to outfit the

new putative rulers of China – not only the non-officeholding gentry, but also the largely illiterate peasantry – with virtues appropriate to their station. For reformers like Liang Qichao and later thinkers of the radical, modernization-focused May Fourth Movement, rule by man specifically required action in "social" (*shehui*) and "cultural" (*wenhua*) spheres and disavowed the efficacy of institutional or "political" (*zhengzhi*) reform – the position associated with rule by law.

Zhang in general rejects these rule-by-man interpretations and upholds rule by law, at least insofar as he affirms the necessity for political action. His reasons for doing so, however, are less related to a commitment to certain liberal institutions than they are to a deep distrust of the top-down transformative power rule-by-man rubrics authorized, and the stark binary of society versus politics that underlay them. Zhang in fact shares with rule-by-man theorists a belief in the decisive role played by the mental and moral orientations of individuals in transforming the socio-political environment, even as he extends this logic to include institutional as well as moral transformations. This belief in the efficacious political potency of individuals made Zhang skeptical of a pure reliance on institutional changes to achieve political reform, even as it suggested other, noncoercive ways in which a constitutional, self-ruling republic could be brought about. Zhang depicts "men" (or, better, "persons") and "laws" as complementary components of republic-building; his "political talk" (*zhengtan*) simply points out that judicious reliance on institutions offers a path for change that need not presuppose values that are already present on a wide scale.

As a noncoercive model for social change, however, Zhang's reconstructed rule-by-man position commits him to explaining how such personal and community-wide transformations can take place without resort to top-down imposition. If the outcome is to be more spontaneous and ground-up than shaped by external controls, how can differences of opinion, outlook, and background be effectively legitimated? How can the conflicts between differently oriented individuals be adjudicated in a way that will construct, rather than subvert, the cohesiveness of a political community? To his audience trained in the Confucian tradition, Zhang must also explain how and in what ways the morality of an act is related to its efficacy. Can "virtue" admit of plural but equally resonant interpretations, and if so, what are the implications for politics of these plural notions of the good? If Zhang means to place the capacity for political action within reach of every

citizen, contemporary understandings of political action and political actors would have to change.

That change specifically involves how – and in what realms – those actors identify themselves and their actions as "political." In Chapter 5, "Public, private, and the political," I point out that Zhang's unusual combination of individuals acting in diverse, politically significant ways challenges a key distinction that for a diverse range of political theories maintains the integrity of the "political realm": the public-private binary. I argue that Zhang's notion of "political," rather than ascribing political meaning to an act on the basis of where or with whom it is performed, is better understood as a deliberate intervention in a shared fate, or, differently stated, as an attempt to shape social circumstances (*shi*) and environments (*jing*) that are not automatically self-regulating. Comparing his work to a wide variety of theorists of public action, including Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin, as well as his own contemporary, Liang Qichao, I show that Zhang shares their basic understanding of and goals for political action. He disagrees with them, however, about the need – or availability – of collective action to constitute it. It is in fact precisely because individual actions comprise necessary everyday elements of an emergent, shared life that they play such formative roles, even if they can never decisively shape the community in one direction rather than another. By drawing attention to the incremental and everyday processes of polity-building in places of all kinds, Zhang alerts us to further locations for political action that the categories of public and private obscure, and to the activities they categorically constrain by deeming them too limited in effect.

Part III of this book, "Action," details those specific political practices Zhang believes will motivate this emergent, sustainable polity. The first and most foundational of those practices is what Zhang calls "self-awareness" or *zijue*, the eponymous topic of Chapter 6. By "self-awareness," Zhang means the realization by individuals that their actions and mental orientations can constitute the foundation for wider socio-political change. Combined with Zhang's reconstructed rule-by-man position, self-awareness does not elide intersubjective elements or impositions of political forms, but it does frame political action in a way that is not always concerned to build majorities or gather allies to one's cause. I defend this model of singular personal orientation against the argument – made most explicitly by Hanna Pitkin, and indirectly by Liang Qichao – that only action in concert can reflect

the common purpose required for non-tyrannical, legitimate change
to shared environments. Drawing attention to the strong resemblances
between Zhang's idea of self-awareness and the practices of moral
and political mediation that constituted political authority under the
Chinese empire, I argue that Zhang pictures the individual citizen as a
pivot around which turn the materially efficacious power his internal
moral effort partly calls into being (that of the polity acting together)
and the moral legitimacy of democratic rule. Where Pitkin demands
that such self-aware "theorists" become democratic actors by joining
together in common purpose with others, Zhang urges those actors
who have always had a significant but unrecognized impact on Chinese
political life – farmers, rebels, merchants, women – to become "theo-
rists" by assuming their position at the crux of this fraught triangle of
legitimation.

The first step in taking political action for Zhang, then, consists not
in bridging the gaps between oneself and others for the purposes of
concerted action, but in overcoming the disparity between the world
one envisions internally and the reality one faces externally. This kind
of awareness of the self may be needed precisely when politics itself
has failed – that is, has failed not in terms of accomplishing some
objective, but failed absolutely – though this does not discount its
political characteristics. Self-awareness is the first of Zhang's explicit
strategies to reorient the focus of political activity away from "action
in concert" toward disparate – though cumulative – efforts to render
shared problems incrementally and personally tractable, in ways that
complement or supplant deliberately coordinated public control.

The internal retooling that begins with self-awareness takes concrete
shape in the "self-use of talent" (*ziyong cai*), the subject of Chapter 7,
and extends farther outward to include intersubjective understanding
and mutual interpretation with the "accommodation" (*tiaohe*) of dif-
ference, which I discuss in Chapter 8. Identifying the "foundation"
(*ben*) of specifically democratic government in the self-use of talent,
Zhang overtly repudiates traditional forms of governance in which the
imperial center exercised political control through the management
and training of personnel. Whereas "virtue" (*de*), the term more com-
monly a focus of Chinese political reform, has been historically linked
to a discernible and unitary idea of the good, talent manifest outside
imperially sanctioned outlets had long been associated with subversive
cunning – especially on the part of females. The self-use of talent, then,

unmoors talent from the virtues that normalized its deployment, transforming talent into an emblem of unpredictability and nonconformity. Like self-awareness, the self-use of talent signals Zhang's innovative refurbishment of imperial modes of rule for democratic purposes.

The decisions required to "use one's talent" do not involve negotiating the choices of others, but overcoming the tension generated by one's inner moral directive, on the one hand, and the external conditions and oppositions (including legal and political regimes and the actions, desires, and demands of other people) that hinder, shape, or encourage it, on the other. In concrete terms, Zhang's advocacy of the self-use of talent indicated his support for the local political assemblies that nurtured hope for an incipient federalism in early Republican China. Such assemblies were primary outlets for the unstructured talent of merchants, local gentry, and other agents whose lack of an exam degree systematically excluded them from political participation and decision-making under the empire. On institutional and conceptual levels, talent signifies the always destabilizing potential of democratic action.

These local transformations of both institutions and attitudes are complemented by Zhang's well-known doctrine of appreciation of difference, which I examine in Chapter 8, "Accommodation." Like the mental preparation that enables one to self-use talent, accommodation of differences involves a rigorous internal reorientation, yet derives its definitive character and purpose from the changes it inspires in the external world. Where the use of talent acted upon and within local environments, accommodation acts to foster particular relationships between persons, acknowledging the political world as comprising interconnected but differently motivated agents. These "differences" in Zhang's work find personal expression as idiosyncrasy, and political expression as dissent.

Idiosyncrasy recognizes difference across persons as not only inevitable, but also invigorating for political association. For Zhang, this kind of difference names a productive gap between individuals that need not provoke hostility; as opposed to "sameness," difference invites interpretation and engagement that may go far toward explaining how a shared vision of community may be possible among disparate, self-aware individuals. The acceptance of manifold difference facilitates (though, it is worth noting, does not guarantee) the interpretive acts that render any particular exemplary action – like those

of Zhang's founders – meaningful and effective in a political community. As such, the process of recognition and accommodation incited by an instance of difference is more definitively other-oriented than are self-awareness or the self-use of talent, inviting a closer look at the implications of accommodation for the political arenas and discourses Zhang was trying to construct.

Zhang characterizes dissent, the second meaning of difference, as motivating an interplay of forces, ideas, or interests that sharpens the commitment of its participants without fostering mutual exclusivity. Drawing heavily on the work of British liberals Walter Bagehot and John Morley, Zhang insists that spirits of dissent and compromise can both play roles in China's political advancement, as they did in Britain (ZQJ 254). At the same time, it is also one of its preconditions. As Zhang points out, citing Bagehot's lack of appreciation for the habits of the British that make their government successful, "Only once a nation allows dissenting opinions to flourish, can it have cabinet government" (ZQJ 9). China must not only have a parliamentary system, but a range of opinions to express in it. Accommodation is part of this imported framework, yet at the same time remains uniquely capable of resolving the problems of difference and disagreement that arise as China transitions, peacefully and incrementally, to democratic rule. In contrast to Western agonists and difference democrats, however, Zhang characterizes public commonality as multiple accommodations incrementally negotiated within interpersonal relationships, rather than the a priori space that forms the basis for resistance to imposed authority. Zhang thus draws attention to how even public discussions do violence to difference by assuming a willing and pre-formed public to govern the terms of political action.

The tension between "inner" cultivation and "outer" world-ordering that runs throughout Zhang's thought helps him to draw attention to the wide range of transformative individual actions that are taken neither in deliberate concert with others nor completely independently of them. In the concluding chapter of the book, I suggest how this inner–outer axis culminates in a model of political action that can contribute both to the historiography of Republican thought and to modern-day Western discussions of political agency. Zhang's model challenges contemporary perceptions of the political as an exclusively collective and public endeavor, by focusing instead on how internal states result in, even as they are shaped by, external transformation.

He therefore urges a reconsideration of how individual moral effort can be rendered meaningful and effective politically, even as that effort remains embedded within circumstances and institutions beyond the capacity of any one individual to control.

Zhang's "democracy"

All of these practices build toward the self-constitution of a republican regime (*gonghe zhengti*), which to Zhang bears close resemblance to the British liberalism he observed during his studies in England: office-holders are beholden for their power and legitimacy to those they govern, that is, the polity or *guoti*; the legal regime, whether embodied in a written constitution or not, binds both government and governed alike; a federal structure assures self-ruling opportunities for traditionally autonomous locales; and the populace is guaranteed the protection of certain rights such as habeas corpus, free expression, and (to a limited degree) political participation.[24] He expects this new order to come about, however, largely by means of action constituted by purely personal, internal transformations – an approach many have associated with neo-Confucian self-cultivation. Why, then, do I classify Zhang's political theory as a "democratic" and not a liberal, republican, or Confucian one?

In general, liberal and republican theories see particular definitions of liberty as central to their arguments for the best form of government. Although both camps disagree among and between themselves about the exact definition of liberty, most agree that political institutions – including those Zhang advocated – are defensible to the extent that they promote or secure liberty.[25] But Zhang's insistence on these self-constituting practices suggests that he saw little at stake with liberty alone – a word that almost nowhere appears in the work I examine

---

[24] Many historians identify liberal currents in China with the "Anglo-American" variety, but differences between British and American forms of liberalism, as well as their multinational influences from French and German thought, were clear to Zhang and other Republican thinkers. For example, Zhang explicitly defended British parliamentarism against the American-style presidential system promoted by Sun Yat-sen (ZQJ 104–127).

[25] The paradigmatic examples here are Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, and Pettit, *Republicanism*.

here. Zhang's more salient concern is promoting citizen involvement in polity-building, given the absence of even minimal consensus, stable political signs, and social cohesion in the nascent Chinese Republic. These are primarily problems of founding, and they implicate him more closely in democratic discourses about the nature and sites of political action than in liberal or republican discourses about the promotion of liberty. Although he knows his cause could surely be served by the exercise of certain liberties and the protection of an established constitution, he could not assume the security of either. His question was precisely how political communities with particular values and capacities, including the valuing and protection of particular forms of liberty, can come into being, and what role individual citizens play in that formation.

Some commentators have denied the importance of "democratic" discourse to early Republican Chinese thought, pointing out that the term hardly ever appears in texts from that time.[26] However, as historians like Xu Zongmian have pointed out, the concept of democracy was implicit in many early Republican debates as reformers articulated alternatives to "state power" (*guoquan*) by using the concept of "the people's power" (*minquan*). State power was explicitly formulated to counter the democratic tyranny and factional chaos many believed would result from giving the people power.[27] Zhang's vision of a self-constituting republican government is, moreover, unusually egalitarian even among advocates of people's power, in that it does not privilege elites as the sole source of social change or political leadership. He elaborates instead a more accessible set of practices designed to harness, cultivate and regulate diverse sites of power diffused throughout society. In my view, "democracy" captures better than other terms these plural instincts about political action. Whether that democracy be deliberative, aggregative, or even liberal, one of its defining characteristics is recognition of a mass of actors with valid claims to participate in political processes, however defined. To Zhang, self-awareness, the self-use of talent, and the accommodation of differences can and should be undertaken by all individual citizens, to craft not only the contours of their own citizenship, but the polity itself. In this endeavor,

[26] Jin and Liu, "From 'Republicanism' to 'Democracy.'"
[27] Xu, "Shibaizhe de tansuo," 23–25.

the "supreme political value is . . . dispersed power" – a notion at least one political theorist has seen as definitive of democracy.[28]

Zhang's *Tiger* essays were therefore preoccupied with the attempt to bring ever greater numbers of nonelites into political life. It is worth noting, however, that this broad participatory impulse, and the space it furnished for political critique, was not an entirely novel Western import. These political possibilities in the early Republic reflected the influence of neo-Confucianism (*lixue*), a rich and diverse body of thought that constituted late imperial orthodoxy even as it provided resources for critiquing the imperial order. Officially, *lixue* texts – namely Zhu Xi's (1130–1200) authoritative compilation of and commentary on the "Fourteen Books," a set of canonical texts that included works closely associated with Confucius and his followers – served as the basis for state-administered civil exams. Because the exams determined entry into government service, Zhu Xi's texts were intimately familiar to all literate men in China, even if many late imperial intellectual trends differed from or directly rejected the methods and assumptions of this neo-Confucian orthodoxy. At the time of Zhang's birth and early education, for example, "empirical research" (*kaozheng*) scholarship dominated the Chinese intellectual world, promoting philological rather than what was, in the view of its advocates, an overly subjective, philosophical inquiry into canonical texts.[29] *Kaozheng* ideas played major roles in reform ideology of the late nineteenth century, most famously the attempt by Kang Youwei (1858–1927) to idealize Confucius as an advocate of radical institutional reform.[30]

However, Zhang's biographer notes that in Zhang's native Hunan province, neo-Confucian *lixue* remained the dominant intellectual force until the exams were abolished in 1905.[31] Zhang's own attempt to locate these sources of authority and political interpretation in China's new citizens, and not only their intellectual leaders, reflects the neo-Confucian faith that the Confucian Way (*dao*) heralded values everyone could potentially share. Contrary to much popular opinion, Cheng Yi (1033–1107), Zhu Xi and later imperial neo-Confucian

[28] Wolin, "The Liberal/Democratic Divide," 98.
[29] The classic study of this transition is Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology*.
[30] Kang, *Kongzi gai zhi kao*.   [31] Zou, *Zhang Shizhao zhuan*, 7–8.

thinkers were not bent on sustaining what Europeans called an "Oriental despotism" by centralizing absolutist authority; but nor did they irresponsibly ignore the work of governing, as their *kaozheng* critics would later contend. In the words of historian Peter Bol, these neo-Confucians crafted a political theory that destabilized the authority of the central ruler by treating "successful government as dependent on a process of personal and social transformation that could be adopted by all people."[32]

Thomas Metzger, Chang Hao, and other historians have shown that *lixue*'s emphasis on the personal interpretation of Confucian classic texts authorized a deeply fraught mode of political contestation under the late empire, in which scholars could leverage their own interpretation of moral and political authority to censure the rulers in power.[33] Although never officially sanctioned or institutionally implemented, this tradition of moral censure influenced the articulation of political relationships by Chinese elites well into the early Republic and beyond. Zhang's theory can be seen in some ways as extending this form of neo-Confucianism, which historically devolved power away from the ruler toward an independent moral authority – the *daotong*, or "succession of the Way" – lodged in scholars and their ancient learning.[34] Analogously, Zhang attempts to devolve power away from the intellectuals who had assumed the mantle of leadership after the fall of the dynasty, toward the new citizens of China's Republic.

Although Zhang's move retains the form of neo-Confucian political theory, in that he sees personal effort acting independently of the government apparatus as the pivot of wider socio-political order, he must ensure that traditionally unsanctioned actors can be registered as politically legitimate without conforming to the unitary and sometimes mystical moral order neo-Confucianism assumed. This required Zhang to rethink the substantive foundation of politics, marking his major break with the "epistemological optimism" that some have argued motivates the Confucian moralization of social and political life.[35] Part of what so rankled Zhang about the Chinese imperial system,

---

[32] Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 116.
[33] Metzger, *Escape from Predicament*; Chang, *You'an yishi*.
[34] Metzger, *Escape from Predicament*, 132; c.f. de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy*, 27–38.
[35] Metzger, *A Cloud across the Pacific*, 21–31; Chang, *You'an yishi*, 3–32.

and about those who continued to think within its categories, was its conflation of ethical virtue with the capacity to effect political good – a logical fallacy that he explicitly blames on Confucianism (ZQJ 181). Moral goodness does not always result in political efficacy, Zhang realizes, and being "selfless" in the way many contemporary political leaders recommended often resulted in sacrificing oneself not for the greater good but for the power plays of political elites. He saw his own work as an important corrective to particular Confucian tenets embodied in the institutional apparatus of the late empire, particularly those which in his view conflated loyalty to the emperor with loyalty to the Chinese political community as a whole, and those that effectively invalidated both the agency and the contributions of the common people. At that time and place, such a position required Zhang to conceptually refute the still widespread Confucian notion of *minben*, or "the people as root," and replace it with a compelling theory of *minzhu*, or "the people ruling," the term by which democracy eventually came to be known in Chinese.[36]

Zhang does so by emphasizing the legitimacy of an enlightened self-interest, developing concepts such as "talent" and "self-awareness" that bear strong resemblances to late imperial critiques of the "public good" made by Huang Zongxi (1610–1695), Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), Dai Zhen (1724–1777), and others. More importantly, these concepts theorize an outlet for traditionally unsanctioned sectors of society, such as merchants and peasants, to make their mark on politics and work against the grain of established authority. Much of Zhang's work in *The Tiger*, in fact, is dedicated to explaining what it means, in Zhang's words, "to have a self" (*you wo*) – implying that such inner-directed self-reflexivity constitutes an important starting point for thinking and acting politically, for everyone. As a theorist of the so-called "New Culture Movement" that arose after the revolution of 1911, Zhang heralds the growing trend to transform Chinese political culture into

[36] *Minzhu*, like many other terms of Euro-American political, literary, and scientific discourse, was borrowed by Japanese scholars from classical Chinese and then jaggedly reimported back into Chinese linguistic communities. Jin and Liu ("From 'Republicanism' to 'Democracy,'" 473) document four meanings for *minzhu* in China at this time: the emperor, which was the original and earliest meaning of the term in classical Chinese; a popularly elected ruler; a political system opposed in any way to hereditary monarchy; and finally, rule by the people.

one more amenable to individual expression and liberation – returning us to the liberal elements that some commentators assume define his work. From this perspective, Zhang ultimately takes important issue with both neo-Confucianism and democracy. Adherents of the former, for the most part, historically denied the agency of nonelites, who were seen as the beneficiaries rather than the actors of politics; and adherents of the latter usually read the capacity to take free action in concert with others as definitive.

In short, Zhang's democratic/neo-Confucian/liberal account of political action amounts to much more than any of those things considered separately: Zhang's political theory is informed by contemporary British liberal values, conditioned by the new attempt at republican rule in China, and yet deeply indebted to notions of political agency and institutional structure that developed under China's late imperial government. Whatever Zhang's own professions of ideological influence, the tensions among these three disparate political visions help us locate Zhang's unique political stance. Despite, or perhaps because of, his belief that the capacity for founding acts was diffused throughout society rather than concentrated in one or a few elite hands, Zhang's approach to politics does not turn on a belief that such action must always be collective action. This individualized approach to political intervention may be one reason why, despite his faith in broad, varied participation at all levels of society, he rarely invokes such terms as "commoners" or "masses" (*pifu*, *pingmin*) as political actors.[37] For Zhang, *min* (the people) possess ruling authority, but political actors are almost always referred to simply as "persons" (*ren*) – implying by turns that anybody, if not always everyone, can participate successfully in changing shared environments. Zhang's syncretic theory ultimately signals the possibility that some forms of Confucianism can accommodate egalitarian impulses, some forms of liberalism can be focused on personal effort as much as on institutions, and some forms of democracy can harbor individualistic strains.

In what follows, however, I refer to Zhang's efforts as "democratic," or alternatively as linked to "self-rule," because I see his defining

---

[37] One notable exception is in his essay "The State and Responsibility," discussed more fully in Chapter 5, where Zhang states, "the responsibility for protecting the state cannot but extend all the way down to the commoners [*pifu*]" (ZQJ 127–8).

dilemma in the years following 1911 until the May Fourth Move-
ment of 1919 as the attempt to theorize individual members (*ren*)
of the people (*min*) as rulers. Although democratic collective action
suggests that "global" processes often remain beyond the reach of
one individual, the neo-Confucian model Zhang develops reminds us
that local environments are almost always tractable in some degree to
individual control, and that these local transformations can have some-
times spectacular effects on the wider environment. By acting on local
events, people, and environments; revising their inner visions; work-
ing through their inner struggles; confronting the demands, feelings,
and talents of others; and, most importantly, convincing themselves
that their actions, however incremental and small, matter to wider
outcomes, individuals can harness their own uncertain power before –
and sometimes as a prerequisite to – joining together with others. In
the next chapter, I give a fuller picture of the historical background
against which this theory of action played out.