



Plato in East Asia?

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Abstract

Shadi Bartsch in her recent publication *Plato goes to China* (2023) has argued that Plato and the Greek classics have had an out-sized impact on Chinese politics and intelligentsia. This article, while sympathetic to her approach, argues that there is little evidence that Plato and the Greek Classics have exerted any direct influence on Chinese politics. Rather it argues that what influence Plato has had on China is actually indirect via a pre-war national socialist Japanese filter. In pre-World War II Japan Plato was fetishized as the ancient source of western socialist and communist thinking. Radical extremists such as Kita Ikki and Kanokogi Kazunobu created a new ideology that mingled aspects of Platonism with socialism and Japanese nationalism. They hoped thereby to create a modern-day Platonic utopia for the East Asian races (and for the Japanese in particular). This article examines how this modern-day “version” of Platonism with “Asian” characteristics impacted on pre-war Japan and modern East Asia as a whole.

Keywords: Shadi Bartsch, Plato, Chinese intellectual history, Japanese intellectual history, Liang Qichao, Kita Ikki, Kanokogi Kazunobu.

1. Introduction

Shadi Bartsch in her recent fascinating book *Plato goes to China* (2023) has argued that Plato has had an out-sized influence on modern Chinese politics and intelligentsia. In this article we agree with the premise that Plato has indeed impacted on China and the rest of East Asia, but propose that this influence has reached China in a very different way than how it is envisaged by Bartsch. We argue that Plato and Platonism only impacted on China indirectly via the filter of pre-WW2 Japanese national socialism/militarism, whose practitioners dreamed of founding a modern-day Platonic utopia in East Asia (leading to devastating consequences).

The topic Bartsch identified is of course original and of much interest, but accurately determining its import would be crucial to understanding Plato’s stature within contemporary Chinese society. This determination would be called for readers schooled in the Classics and those that aren’t alike, not least as Bartsch reaches not just into Chinese academe but also into Chinese blogosphere. Here, because of its complexity, we focus on both the prewar and post-war eras in China, but limit the discussion to pre-war Japan.

The Classics have since 1978 been reestablished in Chinese academe but that is not the focus of Bartsch's work, however interesting the story may be. She is more captivated by intellectual celebrities outside academe, many of whom have come under the spell of Leo Strauss. However, in real terms, it would appear Strauss has all but modest following in China. There is otherwise as much coverage here of Aristotle, so the choice of Plato in the title may be misleading. We are not arguing Plato's influence across 20th century China was nil, but neither was it as big as Bartsch makes it out to be. In the final analysis, we posit the Greek classics do not have a bigger impact in China than the Confucian classics do in the West. Or else we might think China's to be an exemplary cosmopolitan society.

2. Plato in China

Intuitively, the notion that Plato's foreign thought carries or carried much weight in an intellectually inward-looking society like China's is problematic. Bartsch herself insightfully suggests the Chinese by and large tend to ascribe significance to *their* ancient past to a greater degree than Westerners (p. 78).

In Edmund Fung's magisterial *The Intellectual Foundations of Chinese Modernity*, Plato is mentioned only once for example.¹ Bartsch argues in passing that May Fourth (1919) figures like Wu Mi, Hu Shi, Zhou Zuoren and Luo Niansheng read and sometimes translated the Greek Classics, but she hardly lets them speak their mind (p. 29 fn 53, p. 198). To be sure, the fairly marginal Xueheng circle (1920s-30s) were China's first Platonists but they equally venerated Confucius.²

In Makeham's *Lost Soul*, which deals with the post-Tiananmen era, Plato is mentioned only 3 times.³ Xin Fan's *World History and National Identity in China*, in turn, does not mention Plato at all even though author is schooled in the Classics.⁴ So *a priori* one needs to be wary of assigning Plato too much significance either in the pre-WW2 period or nowadays.

Indeed, the real story may be more arcane yet valuable to true scholars. And that is the fact that China's economic reforms and opening up since 1978 have established the Classics as a legitimate (if peripheral) area of study that generates interesting comparative scholarly work.⁵

Sadly, Bartsch devotes little of her narrative to that angle opting instead to highlight public intellectuals whose commitment to proper standards of scholarship may be open to debate (p. 14). The only exception is Nie Minli, admittedly (p. 81).

The problem is largely one of focus, as Bartsch investigates a "dazzling" array of thinkers in her bid to determine "...just how important the Greek classics have been in China" (p. ix). Here, she does not confine herself to the Greco-Roman world but borrows vicariously from the modern thought of Leo Strauss. It is curious why Bartsch should devote so much space to Strauss' impact on China when so much has, according to her, already been written about it (p. 127). And how central is Strauss to current political debates? As it turns out, Strauss is not mentioned at all in Timothy Cheek's *The Intellectual in modern Chinese History*.⁶

¹ Fung, 2010.

² Liu, 2019.

³ Makeham, 2020.

⁴ Fan, 2021.

⁵ See for example https://journal.hep.com.cn/fpc/EN/volumn/volumn_178.shtml.

⁶ Cheek, 2015.

Namely, the book is titled after Plato but in fact apart from drama an inclusion of all ancient Greek thought is aimed at, particularly Aristotle, Thucydides and the Stoics. Bartsch critically combines two key periods in her study: the May 4th Movement of 1919 and post-1989 developments. Yet the underlying ties between these two periods remain shaky. If one thing clearly stands out in comparing the two periods is that Plato was not front and center in political debates. Rather, Confucianism was once pilloried (1919) and once advocated (post-1984) but at all times in front. However, Mao Zedong did once criticize party members who cited Greek classics (p. 41), and such fate hounded the famous liberal and Grecophile cadre Gu Zhun (p. 43).

Where Bartsch comes close to being persuasive is in her brief expose of Liang Qichao (p. 32), who had been much influenced by Japanese and Western writers. Indeed, Liang discussed the Greek society in his famous work *Xin min shuo*, albeit fairly peripherally. He mentioned Plato only twice. Through Aristotle (not Plato), Liang apparently conjured up the first Chinese republic (p. 36). However, Joshua Fogel's treatment of Liang and his years in Japan mentions Aristotle only twice.⁷ To be fair, Bartsch also mentions translator Yan Fu and communist-to-be Li Dazhao as impacted by the Greek classics.

In Bartsch's view Chinese nationalists nowadays either use the Greek classics to echo Confucius, or to exemplify what is wrong with the West (p. 2). There is no equivalent in the West whereby Confucianism might be appropriated to lionize democracy for example. A particular case in point is slavery as an enduring social ailment in the West going back to ancient Greece, as opposed to its relative scarcity in China (p. 6, 62, 76, 79) – this theme is even trotted out in school textbooks.⁸ A few Chinese scholars even claim Plato caused the Holocaust (p. 12).

The temporal coverage becomes more confusing to the reader when one realizes Bartsch starts off her narrative with the Jesuits even though the Greek classics were not making much inroads at the time beyond the Ming court (p. 18, 23). She otherwise seems to downplay the impact of Jesuits like Ferdinand Verbiest in the Qing court.⁹ Greek philosophy, particularly the Stoics, were better suited to Chinese ears than purist monotheistic Catholicism, so the Jesuits resorted to such teachings (p. 19).

Jumping to the Tiananmen era, even River Elegy the famous TV series that championed adopting Western ways used Greek classics only very selectively (p. 45). In turn, figures whose import is not explained like Xu Datong, Wang Junlin and Wu Shuchen preached Aristotelian values (seen as pro-democracy) (p. 60).

And nowadays Confucian figures like Pan Wei, Tu Weiming, Eric X Li, and Bai Tongdong resort to the Greek classics only tangentially. Similarly, Gan Yang and Liu Xiaofeng employ Greek classics to espouse authoritarianism (p. 50, 52, 71, 91, 168).¹⁰ Liu and Gan have long had “high profile” in China. But Bartsch does not explain how much of their views are covered by for example the national press or prime-time TV. It is unfortunate because elsewhere she does resort to CNKI database counting for article in Chinese on Weber! (p. 106)

3. Plato in prewar Japan and Korea

If the direct influence of Plato and the Greek Classics was meagre at best in 20th century China and arguably remains so in contemporary China, the same cannot be said of their impact on pre-WW2 imperial Japan. Here we have actual evidence of direct influence, front and

⁷ Fogel, 2004.

⁸ Horesh, 2021.

⁹ On Verbiest see e.g., Waley, 2000: 119-120.

¹⁰ Pan Wei (2009) in particular is mostly concerned with the “China model” of economic development.

centre, and it is actually via this Japanese filter that the Greek Classics have indirectly impacted somewhat on East Asia as a whole. This important Japanese reception of the Classics and its enduring indirect legacy in East Asian politics is missed almost entirely by Bartsch in her analysis. We will henceforth briefly explain the significance of Plato to radical ultra-nationalist thinkers in pre-war Japan and outline how their appropriation of Platonic ideas continues to influence the contours of East Asian politics today.

When Japan embarked on its rapid modernization drive in the late 19th century following the Meiji Restoration, the Greek Classics were encountered for the first time by an East Asian intellectual elite as material for serious study and analysis.¹¹ The Classical work that fascinated this Japanese elite above all others was Plato's *Republic*. A full translation of Plato's *Republic* into Japanese was duly completed by Kimura Takatarō (木村鷹太郎, 1870-1931) and Plato's dialogues were also subsequently translated by Kimura in 5 volumes into Japanese between 1903 and 1911. Plato was initially regarded as a cultural/intellectual symbol of Western civilization, but quite rapidly the *Republic* became a must-read for extremist elements among the Japanese elite who wished to radically alter Japan's existing political and social order.¹²

Plato's *Republic* was regarded by these Japanese radicals as having provided the foundational basis of Western socialist and communist ideologies. The text increasingly was thus conceived as the blue print for social revolution. Highly influential extremist intellectuals such as Kanokogi Kazunobu (鹿子木員信, 1884-1949) and Kita Ikki (北一輝, 1883-1937, original name: Kita Terujirō (北輝次郎) devoured Plato's philosophy and developed a quixotic melange of socialism, Platonism and ultra-nationalism which morphed into a curious Japanese version of national socialism.¹³ Unlike the superficial coverage of the Greek Classics which we have noted among Chinese intellectuals, what we see among these Japanese radicals is an in depth study and internalisation of Platonism unmatched in other East Asian intellectual circles. What Kanokogi in particular envisaged was a new political and social system that would encompass "elitism, collectivism, dictatorship, and economic planning", which would in turn transform Japan into "a perfect totalitarian state modelled after Plato's utopia."¹⁴ This dystopian "Platonic" vision of the "perfect" national socialist state (which mingled extreme ideas from the political far right and far left) became mainstream in pre-war Japan and because of Japan's enormous influence in East Asia during this time inspired "adaptations" in other East Asian nations.

Kanokogi, who was in many ways the god-father of Japanese national socialism, was during the 1930s influenced by German national socialism and would modify his views so that it would align with Hitlerism.¹⁵ However, long before this ideological convergence occurred Japan and Kanokogi developed their own 'Platonic' system. Kanokogi was a Western trained classicist-philosopher who despite his Western education came to despise Western liberalism, capitalism and Christianity. After receiving his Master's degree at Columbia University, US, and completing his doctorate at the University of Jean, Germany, he wrote another doctoral thesis at the Tokyo Imperial University (in 1921) titled *Puraton tetsugaku no kenkyū* フラトン哲学の研究 (A Study of

¹¹ Even prior to this Japan had been sporadically exposed to the Greek Classics via Jesuit missions and the so-called *Rangaku*, but its impact on pre-Meiji Japan was minimal. For this particular phenomenon and a good overview of the reception of the Greek Classics in modern Japan see Ichiro Taida (2019). For the fetishization of ancient Greek civilization among the Japanese intellectual elite see Hiroshi Nara 2019.

¹² For a succinct overview of Japanese politics in pre-war Japan see Neary 2002: 7-36.

¹³ The impact of ultranationalist state Shintoism on the development of this national socialism (or more commonly referred to as Japanese militarism) must also be noted.

¹⁴ Szpilman, 2013: 234.

¹⁵ For information see Miyamoto Moritarō, 1984: 200. See also Szpilman, 2013: 233.

Platonic Philosophy). His prior and subsequent writings disseminated the view that only a fully statist model of authoritarian governance could bring about a genuine Platonic utopia and help rid Japan of the pollution that was Western inspired liberalism-capitalism (but the new system would still maintain a market economy, a compromise inserted to placate Japan's ruling elites). Fully embracing the Social Darwinist world view then increasingly popular in intellectual circles he asserted that for the Japanese empire to succeed in a survival of fittest global environment, it must fully adopt *zentaishugi* 全体主義 (totalitarianism) to create the ideal society, a Platonic utopia, which would be the “antithesis of liberalism, democracy and pacifism.”¹⁶

Kanokogi also linked this ideology with his hatred of British and American colonialism in Asia. He thus advocated for a Pan-Asianist agenda (which was unrelated to his pseudo-Platonism, but very much in line with his radical socialist origins) helping to found the Dai Ajia Kyokai 大亜細亜協会 (Greater Asian Association). To understand how significant this body was and how influential Kanokogi and his ideas were in Japan's elite circles during this time, one only needs to look at the membership of this group. They included Hirota Kōki (広田弘毅, 1878-1948) and Prince Konoe Fumimaro (近衛文麿, 1891-1945) who would go on to serve as Japan's Prime Ministers; top-ranking military officers such as General Araki Sadao (荒木 貞夫, 1877-1966), General Matsui (Iwane 松井石根, 1878-1948) and Admiral Suetsugu Nobumasa (末次信正, 1880-1944); important diplomats such as Matsuoka Yōsuke (松岡洋右, 1880-1946) and Yoshizawa Kenkichi (芳澤謙吉, 1874-1965); academics such as historians Murakawa Kengo (村川堅固, 1875-1946) and Hiraizumi Kiyoshi (平泉澄, 1895-1984); and even journalists such as Tokutomi Sohō (徳富蘇峰, 1863-1957).¹⁷ It is thus no accident that Japan called its empire during WW2 the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and referred to the war itself as the Greater East Asia War.

Kanokogi, as noted above, borrowed liberally from both extremes of politics. Thus, he pushed for a very socialist and at the same time NAZI sounding “racial world revolution,”¹⁸ a revolution that would see the proletarian Asian races/nations overthrow the corrupt individualistic Anglo-Saxon capitalist bourgeoisie under the spiritual leadership of the totalitarian, statist Japanese empire ruled by it “philosopher king” (the emperor Hirohito). This intermingling of nationalism with socialism was a potent mix in the East Asian context of the time and would have enormous significance even after Japan's defeat.

Kita Ikki, the other firebrand extremist, who would impact on Japan's version of “fascism”¹⁹ similarly was a Plato fanatic. Both Kita and Kanokogi originally belonged to the same circle of radical heterodox left-wing intellectuals. It is highly likely that they influenced each other in some ways. However, they eventually parted ways (Kanokogi becoming mainstream, Kita becoming the alleged mastermind/ideological figurehead of an attempted military coup, the February 26th Incident). Kita shared many of the same ideas with Kanokogi and was like his more popular former associate an avowed pan-Asianist. Unlike Kanokogi however, who argued for the superiority of the Japanese race, Kita was not a racist and argued for the inclusion of various Asian

¹⁶ Szpilman, 2013: 245. For the full argument see Kanokogi Kazunobu, 1918a: 16-26, and also Kanokogi Kazunobu, 1918b: 1-30.

¹⁷ For information see Matsuura Masataka, 2010: 684. See also Szpilman, 2013: 251.

¹⁸ Szpilman 2013: 262

¹⁹ For an in-depth study of Kita's life and ideas see Wilson, 1969; Osedo, 1973; and Tankha, 2006.

peoples within the Japanese empire as equals.²⁰ He also actually travelled to China and attempted to incite revolution there with his Chinese associates. Kita also differed from Kanokogi in that he remained for the most part a heterodox socialist. His ‘Platonic’ socialism thus embraced the notion of social democracy (*shakai minshushugi*).²¹ In his *Kokutairon oyobi junsei shakaishugi* 国体論及純正社会主義 (The Theory of National Polity and Pure Socialism) published in 1906 he rejected Marxism as being incompatible with Japan and East Asia, and instead he advocated for a new version of state socialism / national socialism which would perfectly realize Plato’s utopia.

It is this merging of a utopian- quasi-Platonic-socialism with nationalism which would come to impact most deeply on East Asian politics from here on in. For any learned follower of East Asian politics one curious anomaly will immediately stand out as being very different from the norms of Western European and American politics: patriotic / nationalistic communists and socialists who indulge in racialism and ethnocentrism. How is this possible? The answer may lie in the experience of pre-war Japan and the impact this empire had on East Asian modernity. Because Japan was the first East Asian country to industrialize, Western political ideologies and philosophical notions entered East Asia via a Japanese filter. Even the ubiquitously used East Asian term for Philosophy 哲學 is a Japanese coined term, a Japanese translation or rather understanding of the Western European term philosophy.²² Because East Asia encountered modernity under the thumb of Japanese rule, political ideologies and government structures in East Asia were likewise intrinsically imbued with Japonisms.

The best example of this is Korea. In South Korea radical left-wing elements are also the most militantly nationalist, anti-Western, and at times virulently racist, touting the ethnic purity of the Korean nation. This ethno-nationalism of radical extremists in South Korea is echoed by the supposedly “communist” regime in North Korea which, in Kanokogian fashion, for their part argue in favour of an autarkic utopia, strictly for ethnic Koreans only, a racist “communist” paradise headed by a dictatorial “philosopher” king who functions as the stand-in for Kanokogi’s Japanese emperor.²³ In contemporary China, yet again we see a compromise of the Kita Ikkian or Kanokogian sort whereby an ostensibly “socialist” / “communist” regime is able to tolerate a degree of market economics, but nevertheless maintains an iron totalitarian grip on the country and its people. The Chinese Communist Party also utilises Han Chinese nationalist rhetoric and like the “militaristic” Japanese empire has fused together in its ideology utopian socialism and nationalism. This blurring of the divide between what in the “West” would be conventional left and right division markers in East Asian politics, it could be argued, is made easier by the above-mentioned quixotic political antecedents left by Japanese colonial rule. Such is its staying power that in modern South Korea “progressives” and “conservatives” alike often see no problems with presidents from their side of the political aisle embracing socialist policies while simultaneously adopting a thoroughly nationalist rhetoric.²⁴

None of this is to suggest that these politicians are consciously aware of what they are doing or always deliberately imitating Japanese antecedents. What is actually causing these ideological conundrums is the internalization of pre-war Japanese ideas/practices that are systemically embedded in state structures. By way of example, Park Jeong-Hee the right-wing dictator of South Korea, who was arguably the living embodiment of this phenomenon, received a Japanese education and was familiarized with the national socialist ideology and

²⁰ Skya 2009: 13.

²¹ For discussion on social democratic movements in pre-war Japan see Totten, 1966.

²² Kanayama Yasuhira Yahei, 2019: 169.

²³ For analysis of this strange phenomenon see Myers 2011.

²⁴ For a full analysis of ethnic nationalism and racialism in South Korea see Shin, 2006.

statist/authoritarian models of administration of imperial Japan as an officer in the Japanese controlled Manchukuo army. After a brief stint as a member of the South Korean communist party after the war, he then tilted right and later after taking control of the country via a coup (before which he allegedly made his followers read about the February 26th Incident that led to the death of Kita) he enacted quintessentially statist, very socialist-sounding economic policies (5-year plans) all the while shouting the mantra of anti-communism. Park Jeong-Hee probably did not even recognise the oddity of what he was doing, since in the Japanese system from which he and his contemporaries acquired their life-lessons, this intermingling of socialism with nationalism was almost natural due to the ubiquitous influence of the national socialists.²⁵

When the Chinese Communist Party began its move away from Maoism and opened up to the outside world under Deng Xiaoping, the quasi-socialist-nationalist model of development of the Park era (itself clearly inherited by Park from the earlier Japanese and Manchukuo national socialist state models) was closely studied and in some ways imitated.²⁶ Neither Park nor his Chinese imitators knew much about Plato. The Chinese would not have reckoned with the fact that they were in fact inheriting/imitating old Japanese ideas/practices via Park. Thus, the real impact of Plato, if we could call it that, on China was extremely indirect, via a Japanese filter which goes unrecognised among present day practitioners who do not even realise that at least some of the strange political and social practices/conventions they regularly grapple with are inspired by (or rather are distortions of ideas drawn from) Plato's *Republic*.

4. Conclusions

In this article unlike Bartsch we have argued for a direct Platonic influence on Japan and via Japan a very indirect impact of distorted "Platonic" ideas on modern East Asian polities: South Korea, China and North Korea. The merging of "Platonic" utopianism of the Japanese variety and various ultra-nationalist and radical left-wing ideologies in East Asia is a topic that warrants an in-depth analysis, since it explains the very bizarre and persistent intermingling of nationalism and socialism in East Asian politics and why it is so easy for political figures and parties in this political space to navigate between/ transition from one extreme to the other. The impact of Plato and the Greek Classics on East Asia is thus quite profound, but at the same time barely recognized and difficult to evaluate due to its indirectness.

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²⁵ For assessments of the Park Jeong-Hee era, especially the high-powered economic growth associated with the so-called five-year plans, see Kim and Sorensen, 2011, and Kim and Vogel, 2011. South Korean historiography is highly politicized and rife with partisan bias and as a result no neutral or balanced historical assessments of either the Rhee presidency or Park's regime currently exist. Even the assessments provided in the above-named sources should be dealt with caution with the understanding that many of the authors are approaching the issue under the influence of highly partisan source materials.

²⁶ Direct corroboration of this is provided by William Overholt in his recollections of his conversation with the Chinese premier Zhu Rongji. He noted that Zhu had studied the "lessons of South Korea with greater attention than most western scholars." <https://ash.harvard.edu/publications/park-chung-hee%E2%80%99s-international-legacy>.

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