Center for Open Access in Science

Open Journal for

Studies in Philosophy

2023 ● Volume 7 ● Number 1

https://doi.org/10.32591/coas.ojsp.0701

ISSN (Online) 2560-5380

OPEN JOURNAL FOR STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY (OJSP)
ISSN (Online) 2560-5380
https://www.centerprode.com/ojsp.html
ojsp@centerprode.com

Publisher:

Center for Open Access in Science (COAS)
Belgrade, SERBIA
https://www.centerprode.com
office@centerprode.com

Open Journal for Studies in Philosophy, 2023, 7(1), 1-18.
ISSN (Online) 2560-5380

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ISSN (Online) 2560-5380

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ISSN (Online) 2560-5380 ▪ https://doi.org/10.32591/coas.ojsp.0701.01001b

Aristeas' Journey to Hyperborea

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Received: 18 May 2023 ▪ Revised: 20 July 2023 ▪ Accepted: 25 July 2023

Abstract

The *Arimaspea* remained for a long time the only detailed report of the further North for the rest of the Greek world. It was widely known in the Archaic and Classical periods, especially among the worshipers of Apollo and became a rich new source about Hyperborea. But it belongs to the memory of the worlds of Homer and Hesiod and simply cannot hold its own against the *Histories* in the contest of ethnographic authority. This study presents Aristeas' alleged mystical journey to Hyperborea, preserved mainly in the accounts of Maximus of Tyre, and compares it to Herodotus' rational mindset.

Keywords: Hyperborea, mythology, Aristeas of Proconnesus, Ancient Greece, history of religion, shamanism.

1. Arimaspea

Hyperborea was an otherworldly paradise, a mythical utopia, which was both part of the mythical past and ever present in Greek literature.[1] The Hyperborean myth may date from as early as the 8th century BC, and possibly even earlier (Bridgman 2005: 3, 71). The first extant written sources explicitly discussing Hyperborea, however, date back to the 5th century BC with Herodotus, Pindar, Simonides of Ceos, and Hellanicus of Lesbos, who referenced earlier, mostly lost sources describing Hyperborea by Hesiod, Homer, and Aristeas. The oldest reference to Herodotus was the 7th-6th century BC, now lost, poem *Arimaspea* of Aristeas of Proconnesus.[2]

The situation with Aristeas is typical for ancient studies: on the one hand, there is an extremely narrow range of known facts, on the other hand, a wide range of interpretations, often as radical in their conclusions as speculative in the ways they are substantiated. *Arimaspea*, composed in three books (Suda, s.v. Aristeas), remained for a long time the only detailed report of the further North for the rest of the Greek world. It was widely known in the Archaic and Classical periods, especially among the worshipers of Apollo and became a rich new source about Hyperborea. Many other manifestations of the revolutions of wisdom were built on dialogue with the heritage of the poem and it continued to be read at least into the Imperial period. It

[1] For a full overview on the Hyperborean myth and its further development refer to my forthcoming paper *Hyperborea on Maps – Always to the North* (2023).

[2] The scholarship on Aristeas is abundant. Note Meuli 1935: 153-64; Dodds 1951: 135-78; Phillips 1955; Bowra 1956; Bolton 1962; Ivantchik 1989; Shcheglov 2001, 2010; Bremmer 2002: 27-40, 145-51; West 2004; Pyankov 2005; Musbahova 2012; Zhmud 2016; Dowden 2019; Gagné 2021: 243-265; Bianchetti 2021.

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disappeared before the founding of the Library of Alexandria, and therefore it is unlikely that any large passages from it can be found in papyri (Bolton 1962: 20-38). The surviving fragments of *Arimaspea* do not mention the Hyperboreans, and are very small and few in number – the longest extant fragment consists of six lines quoted by Pseudo-Longinus in *On the Sublime* 10.4. However, a number of borrowings from the poem are contained in the works of Pindar, Herodotus, Hellanicus, and possibly Hecataeus of Abdera, Alcman, Pliny, Aelian, Plautus, Ennius, Aeschylus (Bolton 1962: 39-73). *Arimaspea* is probably to be dated in the middle third of the 7th century BC (Phillips 1955: 163); 615-595 BC (Dowden 2019); early-to-mid 6th century BC (Gagné 2021: 246); end of 6th or first quarter of 5th century BC (Ivantchik 1989).[3]

- *Arimaspea* remained for a long time the only detailed report of the further North for the rest of the Greek world.
- *Arimaspea* became a rich new source about Hyperborea.
- We find accounts about Aristeas' mysterious journey to Hyperborea in Pliny, Maximus of Tyre and Suda.

Aristeas is the protagonist of his own adventure in the text, indicating that we are dealing with a first-person travel account – a tale of marvel and discoveries. He was citizen of the small Greek city Proconnesus on an island of the same name in the Sea of Marmara and came from a noble family. Very important is the fact that he was connected with the cult of Apollo. It could be said that there were two main factors for the formation of Aristeas' personality – the Hellenic colonization and the invasion of the Cimmerians. They encouraged him to embark on the journey. But his end goal, according to Pyankov, was to reach the Hyperboreans – Apollo's chosen ones. That is why his voyage should be considered more as a kind of pilgrimage than a trade-route initiative (Pyankov 2005: 16; cf. Phillips 1955: 177). The narrative consisted of his travel from his small island city to the deepest reaches of far-away lands, and his return to Proconnesus. His travels lasted seven years. After reaching the northern coast of the Black Sea, Aristeas continued ever further inland through the steppes on his way towards Hyperborea, which he never physically attained in the end. He mentiones seven populations: Greeks, Cimmerians, Scythians, Issedones, Arimaspians, Griffins and Hyperboreans.[4]

Herodotus (4.13-16) remains the main source of information about Aristeas and the starting point for all hypotheses and interpretations. His story consists of three parts: information drawn from the poem of Aristeas (4.13, 16 = fr. 1-2 Bolton), and then two stories told to Herodotus in Proconnesus and Cyzicus (4.14) and in Metapontum (4.15). For some of his information Aristeas claimed his own experience when he visited the Issedones (Hdt. 4.13), and for much else beyond their frontiers he claimed their authority (Hdt. 4.16). His reports on these unknown peoples were so remarkable that the early historians could not entirely neglect him. On the other hand, Aristeas seems not to have been content with this but to have claimed supernatural powers.

[3] One of the reasons for Ivantchik's relatively radical downdating of the poem is because he made a case for a Pythagorean Aristeas. Gagné (2021: 292) does not believe that the *Arimaspea* was composed in a Pythagorean orbit, or that it reflects Pythagorean ideas, whatever date we want to give to the poem.

[4] For Pausanias still, many centuries later, the very sight of a Griffin on a statue could immediately conjure references to the Arimaspians of Aristeas. Pausanias (1.24.5-6) supplies details that do not come from Herodotus. The Arimaspians of the Aeschylean play are obviously not entirely independent from Aristeas' poem. The iconographic theme of the battle between the Arimaspians and the Griffins was particularly popular in Attic red-figure ceramic of the late 5th–4th century BC. While it certainly resonated with *Arimaspea*, and possibly even derived from it, that exponentially widespread theme clearly followed its own autonomous path (Gagné 2021: 276). Aeschylus (*Prometheus Bound* 803-06) calls the griffins "the sharp-toothed unbarking hounds of Zeus".

2. Aristeas' soul journey to Hyperborea

Besides all controversial elements, the *Arimaspea* has another peculiar aspect – part of Aristeas' travel is described as a mystical soul journey. These unusual legends about Aristeas' soul flying like a bird were particularly famous among the worshipers of the Apollo, notably among the Pythagoreans. The stories of Aristeas were introduced into the circle of notions of soul travel and states of trance. Some scholars think that in *Arimaspea*, besides specific information about Scythia, we also find reflections from a mystical practice of a shamanic cult, which was widespread in Scythia (Bongard-Levin 1983: 97). The majority of contemporary scholars accept the real travel and explain the soul journey with later Pythagorean influence. However, both points of view can be reconciled. The sources do not give ground for doubt that Aristeas was in Scythia and reached the Issedones. At the same time, the "mystical element" in *Arimaspea* definitely existed even before and regardless of the influence of the Pythagoreans and Platonists.[5]

Bowra (1956: 2) tried to convince us this way: Herodotus (4.13) says that Aristeas went to the Issedones „being possessed by Phoebus [epithet of Apollo]". When Suda (s.v. Aristeas) says "whenever he wanted, his soul would leave and return again", when Pliny (*NH* 7.52) says that his soul could take the form of a bird, we are not surprised that he should claim to be more than an ordinary traveller and to have more than usual sources of information. Such are indeed described by the 2nd century sophist Maximus of Tyre (38.3), who tells with relish how Aristeas' soul could leave his body, fly into the air, and traverse sea and land until he came to the Hyperboreans; by such means he was able to learn not only about natural phenomena but about the ways of men:

> There was also once a philosopher in Proconnesus called Aristeas. His wisdom was at first regarded with mistrust, because he could produce no teacher for it. Eventually, therefore, he invented an explanation to counter this mistrust. He used to say that his soul, leaving his body and flying straight up to the bright sky, made a circuit of both Greek and foreign lands, along with all their islands and rivers and mountains. The far point in his soul's excursion was the land of the Hyperboreans, and it surveyed systematically all laws and civic customs, types of landscape and variations in climate, expanses of sea and mouths of rivers; what is more, the view it then had of the heavens was much clearer than from below on earth. Aristeas was more convincing when he said this than Anaxagoras or the celebrated Xenophanes or any other exegete of the nature of reality. Men did not yet understand clearly about his soul's peregrinations, nor about the nature of the "eyes" with which it sawall, but believed that the soul had literally to travel abroad if it was to give a wholly true account of all things. (Aristeas fr. 20 Bolton, T13, F1 Bernabé, T 11 Davies)[6]

According to West (2004: 57), Maximus supposed the *Arimaspea* to be something other than a record of straightforward travel enlivened with strange tales told to its author in the course of his journey. His view is further clarified by an earlier passage (10.2-3: the first part = Aristeas fr. 19 Bolton, T12 Bernabé, T1 1 Davies) in which he treats the case of Aristeas as similar to Epimenides' sleep and Pythagoras' claim to be a reincarnation of Euphorbus who fought at Troy:

[5] Instead of "mystical element" most scholars use the term "shamanism". Which, although having the same contextual meaning, I don't like (see n. 8). On shamanism see Meuli, 1935; Chadwick, 1942; Eliade, 1964; Lewis, 1971; Burkert, 1972: 120-165; Dodds, 1973; Burkert, 1996: 67-69; Humprey, 1996. According to Kindstrand (1981: 18), "it is notable that when barbarians, known for their wisdom, arrive in Greece, they always come from the North and their wisdom is displayed in the religious sphere, connected in most cases with the cult of Apollo. We may here recall Orpheus who came to Greece from Thrace". For Thracian "shamanism" see Marazov (1989). For Aristeas' connection with Pythagoras see Burkert (1972: 462): "As for Aristeas, this poet and traveller inspired by Apollo was born too early and reappeared too late after his death to have come in contact with Pythagoras."

[6] Translated by Trapp (1997: 300, 86), modified by West (2004: 57).

> There was a man from Proconnesus whose body lay prostrate, still animate, but faintly and in a fashion not far removed from death. At the same time, his soul, escaping from the body, travelled through the air like a bird, surveying all beneath it - land and sea, cities and races of men, events and natural phenomena of every kind; then, re-entering his body and raising it up again, it used it like an instrument, to expound the different sights and sounds it had experienced in different nations of the world. What is it that Epimenides and Pythagoras and Aristeas are all trying to hint at? Can their theme be anything other than the freedom of the good man's soul from the pleasures and sufferings of the body, when by escaping from the tumult of the physical world and turning its intelligence in on itself, it re-encounters pure truth, free from imperfect images? This does indeed resemble a beautiful slumber, full of vivid dreams; it does indeed resemble a lofty soaring of the soul, not over mountain peaks in the misty and turbulent lower atmosphere, but beyond this in the heights of the calm ether, as peace and tranquility escort it serenely to truth and revelation.[7]

There might seem to be some contradiction between Herodotus' account of a traveler who gets information by hearsay and Maximus' account of an initiate who gets it by vision,[8] but the answer is not far to seek if we assume that Aristeas presented himself in both roles and that Herodotus chose to stress the one and Maximus the other (Bowra 1956: 2). According to West (2004: 58, 64) "Herodotus has toned down the more sensational or fantastic elements in Aristeas' self-presentation", "he has quite drastically rationalized Aristeas' account", "those features of the *Arimaspea* which did not fit this view he apparently dismissed as mere poetic embellishment". Herodotus would simply have left it out of his narrative, as he so often does when faced with fantastic poetic material (Gagné, 2021: 257).[9] Although not having "special commitment to the

[7] Speaking about Pythagoras, a statement of Bolton (1962: 174) should be mentioned, according to whom "in *Arimaspea* it was stated that a feature of the righteousness of the Hyperboreans was their vegetarianism; it would follow that vegetarianism must particularly commend itself to Apollo, and so Pythagoras adopted it" (cf. Burkert 1963). But Bolton did not supply any evidence on which to base this hypothesis. Although this seems more like the doctrines of Pythagoreanism, Orphism, the teachings of the sophist Protagoras, or some school of philosophy, we find account in direction vegetarianism in a fragment of Hellanicus of Lesbos, an author of the late 5th century BC, preserved from 2nd century AD in Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 1.15.72). Hellanicus was reported to have written that the Hyperboreans lived to the north of the Rhipean Mountains (he may have used Herodotus as his source), learned Justice, did not eat meat, but only wild fruits.

[8] Instead of "initiate", Bowra used the, what I think not quite appropriate, word "shaman". My concern is that "shaman" is used as a general expression applicable to the magico-religious life of all primitive peoples. As Gagné 2021: 53 notes, the "Greek shamanism" starts with Levesque 1789 (who researches the influence of Thracian "Orphic shamans" in Greek society) and is further developed by Creuzer, 1803, Lobeck, 1829 and Meuli, 1935. For Greek shamanism in general, and for Aristeas' relation to the beliefs of his age, see Dodds (1973: 135-178). He states (p. 135), that *Arimaspea* "may have been modelled on the psychic excursions of northern shamans" (cf. Bremmer, 2002: 27-40; 2016; Gagné, 2021: 53, 252). Burkert (2004: 74) called these opposing views among scholars "battlefield between rationalists and mystics".

[9] It should be noted that in Book 3 already, in a long disquisition on the furthest North, the poem of Aristeas is indirectly singled out both as a false report and a reflection of truth. Hdt. 3.116: "Then again towards the North of Europe, there is evidently a quantity of gold by far larger than in any other land: as to how it is got, here again I am not able to say for certain, but it is said to be carried off from the griffins by Arimaspians, a one-eyed race of men. But I do not believe this tale either, that nature produces one-eyed men which in all other respects are like other men. However, it would seem that the extremities which bound the rest of the world on every side and enclose it in the midst, possess the things which by us are thought to be the most beautiful and the most rare." See also Nesselrath (1995; 1996; cf. Bridgman 2005: 73), who concludes that: "Aristeas' account in Herodotus is a composite one. The Hyperboreans themselves appear to be Greek, unless they were originally brought from Thrace by Orpheus or someone like him." Another devastating blow against Aristeas comes from Hdt. 4.32: "Concerning the Hyperborean people neither the Scythians nor

notion that the historical Aristeas actually travelled to the territory of the Issedones", Gagné (2021: 256, 258) thinks that the fact that the two passages from Maximus reflect similar matter differently, independently and without contradiction, and that they do dot derive directly from Herodotus, argues in favor of their value as a legitimate source of information, albeit "adapted to its own medio-Platonician diction"; there is no strong opposition between the flight of the soul and the land voyage described by Herodotus, or between the fact that Herodotus has him go no further than the Issedones, and that Maximus locates the boundary, the furthest point of his journey, far beyond this, in the land of the Hyperboreans itself.

Bowra (1956: 9) concludes, that the surviving scanty lines of the *Arimaspea* show that Aristeas, who knew the Homeric or epic language, used it in his own way to produce new effects and to introduce new subjects in such a manner as to acclimatize them, despite all their strangeness, to a familiar world of poetry. In relating his wonderful tales, he adopted an easy, persuasive manner, which has no traces of mystification or desire to impress. Despite his shamanistic claims, he was treated more or less seriously by serious authors.

Accodring to Shcheglov (2010: 14), two things undermine the credibility of Maximus' story. On the one hand, he ignores all those specific circumstances that Herodotus mentions: the Cimmerians, Scythians, Issedones, Arimaspians and Griffins. Meanwhile, it is these circumstances that are the most reliable part of our knowledge about the content of *Arimaspea*, and only their mention could testify to the reliability of Maximus' information. The information of Maximus can be deduced and explained from the story of Herodotus, but Herodotus' information from Maximus' story cannot.

The eschatological ethnography of the *Arimaspea* served as one of the foundations for a radical claim on knowledge. On the basis of the extraordinary visions offered in the poem, Aristeas eventually came to be seen as one of the great magicians of the age, together with other purifiers and wonder-workers like Epimenides or Empedocles. The *Arimaspea* is one of the most intriguing experiments of the early Archaic period with hexameter narratives of distant travel and the descriptions of lands and peoples.[10] Aristeas did not invent Hyperborea. He built on the affordance of the resonant tradition of northern mirages. But his monumental and detailed

any other dwellers in these lands tell us anything, except perchance the Issedones. And, as I think, even they tell nothing; for were it not so, then the Scythians too would have told, even as they tell of the one-eyed men. But Hesiod speaks of Hyperboreans, and Homer too in his poem the Epigoni, if that be truly the work of Homer." Herodotus concludes that the Issedones themselves do not know about the Hyperboreans. They come from the fantasies of Greek poetry, the memory of worlds of Homer and Hesiod, and that is where the *Arimaspea* also squarely belongs. The old poem simply cannot hold its own against the *Histories* in the contest of ethnographic authority. The new cosmography classifies and neutralizes its predecessors and all their ontologies (Gagné, 2021: 312). In 4.33 Herodotus relates to the Hyperborean maidens and their gift offerings, describing similar customs of the Thracian and Paeonian women, alluding to the probable point of origin for the offerings, which does not point to the further North, but more prosaically to nearby Thrace. Herodotus clearly does not believe in the existence of the Hyperboreans, but felt compelled to mention them, as they were such a part of Greek myth and literary history (How & Wells, 1936; Fehling, 1994; Bridgman, 2005: 60; Gagné, 2021: 314). Romm (1989) and Priestley (2014: 113-114) think the opposite. In 4.36 Herodotus laughs – it is the only place in the *Histories* where we are made to see him actually laugh at the arguments of his rivals.

[10] For the authority of *Arimaspea* we can judge from the fact that in the middle of Metapontum's agora (cf. Keesling, 2017: 843) was a statue that, according to Herodotus' (4.15) local interlocutors, represented Aristeas of Proconnesus. It will remain impossible for us to know the "true" origin of that statue, but Gagné (2021: 285) sees no good reason to doubt Herodotus: in the second half of the 5th century BC, a local form of knowledge current in Metapontum attributed the monument to the poet of the *Arimaspea*. The great eschatological traveller, otherwise bound to no place and no relation, was given a permanent presence in the city of Magna Graecia: something like an emblem of the great movement of the Ionian sages to Italy after the fall of Miletus and its neighbors, like Xenophanes himself, or Pythagoras.

portrait of the wondrous road to Hyperborea would enduringly transform this tradition, in depth, and it made it a vital point of reference for all further recompositions of the possible worlds of the furthest point (Gagné, 2021: 264-5).

3. Conclusion

The *Arimaspea* remained for a long time the only detailed report of the further North for the rest of the Greek world. It was widely known in the Archaic and Classical periods, especially among the worshipers of Apollo and became a rich new source about Hyperborea. Two are the main notions about Aristeas' contact with Hyperborea.

An extended, profoundly original reconfiguration of the epic travel narrative, *Arimaspea* saw Aristeas go beyond the maritime routes of his Odyssean and Argonautic predecessors to reach deep inland into the realm of the Issedones. If we are to accept something of Maximus of Tyre's testimony, and Gagné (2021: 303) sees no good reason not to, Aristeas claimed to have reached the road to Hyperborea through soul flight, thus making his journey one that escaped the constraints of mortal travel through land or sea.

Maximus of Tyre's sources about Aristeas portray him as a mystic, but say nothing about his journey and discoveries. On the contrary, the fragments of *Arimaspea* and the sources based on it, provide interesting information about the geography, ethnography, and folklore of the Scythians, but say nothing about Aristeas himself and provide no grounds to believe his poem sets forth a mystical experience (Shcheglov, 2010: 30; cf. Gagné, 2021: 247).

For the Archaic Greeks Hyperborea was a completely real, although extremely difficult to reach territory – "neither by ships nor on foot" (Pind. *Pyth*. 10.29). Thus, Aristeas' alleged extraordinary ability seems to be the only possible way to reach the mythical and otherworldly northern utopia.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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Open Journal for Studies in Philosophy, 2023, *7*(1), 9-18.
ISSN (Online) 2560-5380 ▪ https://doi.org/10.32591/coas.ojsp.0701.02009k

Plato in East Asia?

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Received: 27 June 2023 ▪ Revised: 7 August 2023 ▪ Accepted: 9 August 2023

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.

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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 Catholithism, 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 Kyōkai 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-raking 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 26thIncident). 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* 国体論及ひ純正社会主義 (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 racialist, 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.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The authors declare no competing interests.

[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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Open Journal for Studies in Philosophy, 2023, *7*(1), 1-18.
ISSN (Online) 2560-5380

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Open Journal for Studies in Philosophy, 2023, 7(1), 1-18.
ISSN (Online) 2560-5380

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