



CONFUCIANISM AND THE CONTINUATION OF ANTI-ENLIGHTENMENT

Xiaojie Chen



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In 18th-century Europe, before the “Counter-Enlightenment,” two coexisting perspectives emerged within the Enlightenment: the first was the belief that humans were endowed with the capacity to think independently, which led to the possibility of egalitarianism; the second was the restriction of the faculty’s scope of application, which argued that the people must rely on intellectuals as their new shepherds. The latter is “Anti-Enlightenment” and anti-egalitarian.

This book argues that Neo-Confucianism showed these two Enlightenment trends after the 11th century. The imperial examination reform allowed commoners to rise to the bureaucratic elite, thereby achieving top-down “Enlightenment.” Despite the emerging elite’s claims of caring for the people, this benevolence does not expect the people to become self-sufficient adults, which brings up this book’s second theme of comparing French Revolution “Fraternity” with Confucian “Benevolence.”

Taking “Enlightenment” and “Fraternity” as clues, the author analyses the intellectual history in four countries (China, Japan, Germany, and France), revealing not only the inherent “Anti-Enlightenment” mentality within the European Enlightenment, but also the process of “Enlightenment” commenced as early as the 11th century in China.

This book will appeal to scholars of Enlightenment, intellectual history, and comparative study of East-West thought.

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Prologue¹

This book is a historical voyage on the topics of Enlightenment and Fraternity, starting from China and Japan, passing through Germany and France, and then returning to the starting point. But actually, there is only one problem that I have concerns about: Equality. People today find it extremely difficult to deny that the world after the 1990s is far from as good as what the proponents of the “world order” (politically, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the “Waves of democracy,” and economically, the so-called globalisation) claimed, especially since Thomas Piketty initiated the discussion on capital accumulation and social inequality. The majority of East Asian intellectuals blindly follow the United States, whether they are in China, Japan, or South Korea. They hold that American liberal democracy should be the best and ultimate form of society. However, they are obviously wrong; democracy can take many forms. Once intellectuals stop considering and interacting with the complexity of the world, they simply live in the castles they have constructed for themselves.

This book, naturally, does not directly engage with contemporary issues, and the intellectuals are not only to blame for our current troubles. Actually, the impact of American liberal intellectual elites today is a result of their high level of collaboration with the media and power. Although France and Germany academics share certain characteristics, they cannot be compared to America’s cultural export in general. Instead, because some basic ideas have been a recurring theme throughout history—even if each occurrence have its own unique context and evolution—I decided to begin my discussion with the Enlightenment in 18th-century Europe, particularly in Germany and France, as well as the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century. Who today would believe that the Enlightenment of the 18th century, the rebellions of 1968 (with the emergence of postmodern thought), and the wokism that emerged in American universities after 2018 and quickly expanded are all related? On the surface, the woke leaders perceive the French intellectuals of 1968 as conservative, in addition to the Enlightenment philosophers as “racists” and “reactionaries.” However, among the three, there emerges a dynamic reminiscent

¹ This book utilised the paraphrasing tool function of Quillbot, a generative AI application, to improve English expression. The version number is v15.555.0.

of Freud's patricide complex: a once-rebellious father and a son striving to rebel in turn.

After the 1960s, the term "Enlightenment" (French: *Lumières*) started to be widely used and promoted in major Western nations, based on statistical analysis of word frequency. I'm not acquainted enough about the global uprising of 1968 to draw the conclusion that there is an "inevitable connection" between 1968 and the Western intellectuals' growing appreciation of the Enlightenment. However, many postmodern scholars tend to ignore the numerous similarities between the two, such as almost eternal scepticism. This has the potential to be the link between the 1968 worldwide uprising and the 2018 American wokism movement.² Nonetheless, this interpretative approach may not be entirely equitable to the Enlightenment. While the pursuit of "negation" and "critique" is a trait of philosophers like Voltaire, applying this to Rousseau or Kant would make researchers frown. Still, for the majority of European intellectuals at the end of the 18th century, including the German Romantics who initially backed France, this was how they understood the French Enlightenment.

It may seem to some readers that I am beginning to contradict myself. What do I mean when I criticise this after stating that Enlightenment ideas and 1968 share similarities? In my opinion, as a unifying term, "18th-century European Enlightenment" itself is not stable or homogeneous. France and Germany are the two primary sources of Enlightenment thought.³ There are numerous minor distinctions between these two countries' development trajectories and traits. Regarding the importance of criticism, it's unlikely that any researcher would strongly deny it. However, if one were to conclude that Enlightenment philosophers are just like the kids who always play the game of building a sandcastle and then laughingly crashing it down, that would be excessive to treat the particular mentality of contemporary intellectuals as universal phenomenon.

First, let us discuss the Enlightenment. In addition to being challenging to understand within a cohesive framework, the European Enlightenment is riddled with contradictions in its many assertions. On the one hand, the luminescence of Enlightenment stands as the "light of reason," contrasting with the "light of revelation" derived from God. This illumination is presumed to be an inherent capability of all individuals, suggesting a potential for egalitarianism. Ironically, though the Enlightenment intellectuals declared to critically analyse all prejudice, which we all know is impossible in practice, the majority of them blindly embraced the conventional wisdom that questioned the moral and intellectual capacities of the people. This was especially true of Prussian German elites after 1770, when their views on Enlightenment gradually moved from philosophical conjecture to

2 I Got the Hint from Pierre Valentin, *Comprendre La Révolution Woke*, Paris: Gallimard, 2023, pp. 187–192.

3 Although England is undoubtedly a significant reference point for the development of Enlightenment and the English do indeed refer to the 18th century as the "Age of Reason," England is the one that is difficult to place within the same framework.

the ethical and cultural aspects of the state or community.⁴ Instead of a universal Enlightenment, it became more about guidance and education from those in power to those beneath the people. Such an interpretation of Enlightenment subtly carries undertones of elitism and even the risk of obscurantism.

In fact, the latter form of “Enlightenment” is the doctrine that China and Japan embraced in the 19th century following their exposure to the “Western impact.” It, along with a number of discourses on “modernisation,” certainly fits into the myth that Europeans created (and that Americans carried on after the 1990s): a few European elites were first made aware of the key issues of modernity (“liberty,” “social contract,” “democracy,” etc.), then through public education and other channels to let the people learn these truth gradually. In the process of Europe becoming a “civilised nation,” the Enlightenment continued to extend to the “stagnant” East. Then, the intellectuals of Japan and China learnt from Europe and transferred the truth to their own countries, thus initiating their own “Enlightenment.”

It is in this very sense that this book employs the term **Anti-Enlightenment**, to convey a specific meaning, distinguishing it from the more commonly used term in the Anglophone world, “counter-Enlightenment,” which predominantly refers to those figures and ideologies that critiqued or opposed the ideas of Enlightenment after its inception. This book emphasises that the modern Japanese and Chinese use of *qimeng* (啟蒙) to translate and interpret “Enlightenment” predominantly reflects the second interpretation of “Enlightenment” (i.e., Anti-Enlightenment)—a guidance or leading force. This interpretation betrays the spirit of equality, which was the most revolutionary facet of the 18th-century Enlightenment.

However, there is really no need to publish this book at all if this is the sole level of comprehension, for Europeans have already sufficiently criticised themselves for this. I will touch upon how some philosophers of the Enlightenment (Voltaire, Leibniz, Quesnay, etc.) held traditional Chinese culture and Confucianism in high regard, then throw Ariadne’s Twine back to the 11th–12th centuries in China, which is even further away. Few Western readers are familiar with Neo-Confucians in the Song Dynasty, where the Minoan labyrinth begins. I’ll attempt to prove that these moral philosophers’ fundamental beliefs and conducts actually predicted the entanglement between the Enlightenment and the Anti-Enlightenment that developed in Europe.

The term “Continuation” is used in this book to refer to “Anti-Enlightenment” for two main reasons: First, the mainstream consciousness of intellectuals in China, Japan, Europe, and the United States is still “Anti-Enlightenment.” Second, I believe that attempts to fully dissolve the complexity of human nature and politics, as well as to establish one’s own privileged position, have always been an obsession that intellectuals throughout history find hard to overcome.

In contemporary European and American societies, it is illuminating to scrutinise both “knowledge” (truth) and “morality” (goodness). On the intellectual front,

4 H. Stuke, “Aufklärung,” in Otto Brunner (hrsg.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon Zur Politischsozialen Sprache in Deutschland* Bd. 1, Stuttgart, 1972, pp. 247, 249.

the amalgamation of science, state authority, and capital has culminated in a form of scientific absolutism and a prevailing expertism. Dissenters, those challenging the narratives promoted by governments and mainstream media (such as the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine), are swiftly branded as “conspiracy theorists.” Morally, long-standing issues like racial discrimination in these societies are increasingly garnering attention. Yet, certain affirmative action measures, particularly in the United States, could run the risk of overcorrection. Those who voice concerns or opposition to these measures are swiftly labelled “racists.”

Compounding this, individuals bearing these labels are frequently dismissed as being “uneducated,” and any political momentum they generate or ideologies they hold are derogatively termed “populism.” In my perspective, this disdain exhibited by the mainstream elite towards the commoners signals the emergence of a new form of “Anti-Enlightenment” in our era.

The second key issue is “Fraternity.” When discussing broader human bonds, the Enlightenment philosophers’ abstract and universal tone was more in line with the Christian theories they were criticising. What are the opinions of today’s intellectuals on this? They appear more likely to begin with a negative remark: “We oppose hate.” Who is engaging in “hate”? They are the “far right” (they call everyone who doesn’t share their views), the “racists,” the “transphobic,” and so forth. In a work that appears prophetic now, Philippe Muray made the observation decades ago that “the Good,” the force that would dominate our stifling societies, “has always needed Evil, but today more than ever. The false Good needs scarecrows.” The Good, aided by the Feast, “rely, to begin with, on the invented power of their supposed enemies. [...] They feed on the feeling of persecution.”⁵ I’m not attempting to deny the presence of discrimination based on gender and colour, but the question may be: Are the proponents of “anti-discrimination and anti-hate” themselves resentful? Does their list of “high words” actually include the word “Fraternity” and “love,” or do they actually subscribe to the doctrine of “repressive tolerance”?

Marcuse laments that “false consciousness has become universal” in his essay on “repressive tolerance.” However, he also notes that the Archimedean point for greater liberation can be provided by the rupture of false consciousness.⁶ His suggested remedy really foreshadows the political campaign that would occur in American society decades later: revolutionaries must employ anti-democratic tactics to preserve democracy if the society in which I live is truly anti-democratic. Because hate speech is too easily transformed into hateful behaviour in today’s society, censoring Nazi or “far-right” movements is insufficient. We must completely “precensor” the writings and statements of some individuals, or even stop them from being published, in order to combat fascism.⁷ “As long as they live in a society like ours, they are not free. So the question [...] becomes urgent: How did

5 Philippe Muray, *L'Empire du bien*, Paris: Perrin, 2019, pp. 8, 32.

6 Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1965, pp. 110, 111.

7 Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, p. 111.

Marcuse acquire the right to tell others what their real needs are? How did he escape the indoctrination that affects others?"⁸ MacIntyre says, criticising Marcuse's elitist belief that he is better than the controlled. He further argued that Marcuse's idea of "repressive tolerance" is the most perilous of the teachings, since it would cause us to relive some aspects of the Stalinist experience.⁹

Unfortunately, compared to Marcuse's time, the issue has gotten worse. We have seen a sort of reversal in modern times when we face the global exploitation machine of capitalism, which is progressing under the guise of "liberty": the systematic victims of globalisation (the word "system" has long been misused by liberal intellectuals and the media) have emerged as the producers of various forms of "hate" and "scourges" that Western intellectual elites and media have been condemning. While the experts travel the world every week promoting their advanced theories against gender and racial discrimination, the poor are found to be destroying the environment and ecosystems, being hostile to immigrants and sexual minorities; the wealthy, while enjoying every luxury as possible, could always avoid moral and even legal accusations with the help of experts.

Let's use the immigration debate as an illustration. Immigration from poor nations are welcome by the Europeans, particularly the political and cultural elites, who have always placed a higher value on cosmopolitanism and "diversity" than on national identity and traditional values. In order to highlight cultural variety as a key component of contemporary British identity, Prime Minister Tony Blair created "Cool Britannia."¹⁰ Common Germans, like many others throughout Europe, enthusiastically displayed hospitality (*Gastfreundschaft*) when Angela Merkel opened the door to a large number of migrants from the war-torn Middle East in 2015. When about a million refugees had arrived in Germany alone by the end of that year, the public's reaction became ambivalent.¹¹ The majority of supporters of "populist" parties are drawn from the lower and middle classes, who are more susceptible to the adverse effects of an influx of immigrants.

In Western countries, intellectuals and the mass media frequently accuse anti-immigrants of being ignorant and hateful. However, we must be clear about one thing: plenty of research on the evolution of values indicates that liberalism has advanced throughout most of the world, especially in North America and Europe. This trend is supported by the World Values Survey, which has published data in

8 A. MacIntyre, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and a Polemic*. New York: The Viking Press, 1970, p. 64.

9 A. MacIntyre, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and a Polemic*, p. 92.

10 Charlotte Werther: "Rebranding Britain," *Moderna Språk*, 2011, <http://ojs.ub.gu.se/ojs/index.php/modernasprak/article/viewFile/664/616>.

11 "Number of migrants in Germany hits record high," *Reuters*, 12 April 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-germany-immigration/number-of-migrants-in-germany-hitsrecord-high-idUKKBN1HJ2BQ>; Krishnadev Calamur, "Migration Is Down, Crime Is Low, but Merkel Is in Trouble," *Atlantic*, 18 June 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/germany-migration-politics/563051/>.

six times since the 1980s.¹² According to the studies conducted in recent years, many people who support the “populism” do not actually despise immigrants or refugees; rather, they are more concerned with the elites’ control over politics and globalised economic policies, as well as their lack of concern or even animosity towards the people.

Let’s examine how Robespierre, who represented the most radical politics at the end of the 18th century, acknowledged people and Fraternity. The mainstream perception, which was dominated by the Anglo-American academia, made him as the synonyms of the politics of terror. Food-related riots occurred in several parts of France in early 1793 due to price instability and a shortage of food harvests, especially in Paris in late February. “I am not saying that their movements are an attack,” Robespierre tried to defend the people’s uprising, “when the people rise up, should they not have a goal worthy of them? but should pitiful goods occupy them?” Naturally, Robespierre did say that the people were ignorant. “The French people are in turmoil, painfully worried, without knowing precisely either the source of their misfortunes, or the means to put an end to them [...they are] victims of their own ignorance, or of their own prejudices.”¹³ Such position of relative sympathy and understanding, as well as the attribution of popular action to “ignorance,” can be seen as both evidence of Robespierre’s own class position, which is still elitist, but also as a means of justification.

Even the current historians of the French Revolution believe that Robespierre’s Fraternity (especially after 1793) was more of a “Solidarity” that was mobilised within the revolutionaries. Let’s examine the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1793*, which was never put into effect but expressly supports the right of resistance: according to Article 33, the people’s right to oppose unfair authority oppression is “a consequence of other human rights.” When the government violates the rights of the people, insurrection is, for the people and for each section of the people (*chaque portion du peuple*), the most sacred rights and the most indispensable duties (Article 35).¹⁴ This even surpasses the limits of Robespierre’s revolutionary mentor, Rousseau, who, as is well known, explicitly rejected both the possibility of particularity for the portion of the population and the people’s right to resist in his theory of the social contract. If this cannot be interpreted as an indication of Robespierre’s deep love and faith in the people, then I am not aware of any other politician of the era who could be considered to have possessed this quality.

For sure, I have no intention of denying Robespierre’s limitations either. Consider his address on the Supreme Being during the height of the revolutionary tensions, where he argued that even if people are always right, they nevertheless need guidance. Religion was therefore required, or at least the Voltairean natural

¹² <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>.

¹³ *Œuvres de Maximilien de Robespierre*, Paris; P.U.F, 1958, Vol. IX, “Sur les troubles des subsistances,” p. 275; Vol. VIII, “Sur la déchéance du roi et le renouvellement de la législation,” p. 409.

¹⁴ <https://www.conseil-constitutionnel.fr/les-constitutions-dans-l-histoire/constitution-du-24-juin-1793>.

religion, despite Robespierre's lack of respect for him. People realise that they are the greatest of all once they unite—How is this in fact not the most radical attribution of Enlightenment thought? According to Rousseau, at the moment they stand at the centre of the stage, the people realise their own greatness—they are indeed both actors and audience. However, the real director is beyond the world, Rousseau muttered, he is the great legislator, and in principle he should be a foreigner. In fact, this is where all of the Enlightenment's contradictions are concentrated. Despite Robespierre's statement in his speech that “you will no doubt not conclude from this that it is necessary to deceive the people in order to instruct them,”¹⁵ unfortunately, I can still hear Frederick II's voice disguised in an enquiring tone: “Is it beneficial for the people to be deceived?”

Regarding the connection between China and the two central themes of this book (Enlightenment and Fraternity), Confucianism actually fits in perfectly with how the Neo-Confucians interpreted the *Great Learning's*¹⁶ opening paragraph (“What the Great Learning teaches, is to illustrate bright virtue; to renovate the people”) in two interpretations: one is Zhu Xi's direction of “renovating the people” (inspire and guide the people to goodness, corresponding to Enlightenment) in the Southern Song Dynasty, another is Wang Shouren's direction of “loving the people” (care for the people as the parent loves his children, corresponding to Fraternity) in the Ming Dynasty. Either interpretative direction or the related political practice is based on the assumption that the people are ignorant (not necessarily evil), so they cannot fully take responsibility for their actions and are easily led astray. Therefore, those in positions of authority must not only look out for the people but also indoctrinate and guide them. From ancient times to the present, the prevailing narrative among Chinese intellectuals has been shaped by such elitist viewpoints and self-perceptions: during his lifetime, Yu Yingshi, a well-known historian who was critical of China and lived long time in the United States, boasted that “wherever I am, there is China.” Meanwhile, if you have the opportunity to speak with a Peking University alumnus, a historical echo that has persisted since the emergence of the scholar-official class of the Song Dynasty is readily audible: “The monarch needs to cooperate with us to govern the world.”

The elite tech oligarchs who are quickly extending their influence into politics may be the matter we should be more concerned about. With the exception of Elon Musk, the majority of Silicon super elites rarely speak in public, in contrast to university academics. However, that doesn't mean they don't have their own opinions about politics and society, nor does it mean that their ideology and influence can

15 *Œuvres de Maximilien de Robespierre*, Vol. X, “Sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains, et sur les fêtes nationales,” p. 453.

16 A work of pre-Qin thought, highly acclaimed after the 10th century AD, devoted to the relationship between state government and the advancement of individual self-cultivation.

be ignored.¹⁷ Many of these elites came from California and began their careers in Silicon Valley, which some academics have dubbed “The Californian Ideology.” California is a magical place, with wealth that rivals that of entire nations, and within this state, it has nurtured the liberal intellectuals who proclaimed themselves rebels in 1968, as well as the foremost American tech elites of the 21st century. Even though Piketty’s 2018 analysis refers to these two groups as “Brahmin Left vs. Merchant Right”,¹⁸ the savvy businessman’s ideology is more opportunistic (there are undoubtedly many archetypes in politics, such as French President Macron, who is referred to as a chameleon). That means if it’s profitable, tech elites who originally leaned towards political conservatism (economically they mostly follow American-style liberalism) can instantly transform themselves into defenders of the most radical values. We therefore observe that the majority of American tech oligarchs joined the bandwagon of solidarity with LGBT+ and racial justice. Not only do they advertise in favour of these progressive values, but they’re also generous with various green and philanthropic endeavours. However, they have been virtually mute in the face of global inequality and income disparity. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon; the business elite has been aware of the Chinese proverb “make a fortune in a quiet voice” at least since Carnegie and other American tycoons made their riches. To provide the impression that they are decent people, entrepreneurs are prepared to make concessions on distribution-related matters and engage in various forms of charity. They also recognise the influence of public opinion and thus donate substantial funds to universities, libraries, and similar institutions, earning widespread acclaim from intellectuals.

The recent election victory of Trump, who is allied with Musk, has made Silicon Valley’s tech elites more open to the prospect of a future free from the restrictions imposed by the Democrats. Although the oligarchs may not be fully aware of the future they envision, there are some indications and paths that are evident. Marc Anderson, the founder of Netscape and a member of Meta’s board of directors, for instance, claims that “most people have poor, sad, and uninteresting lives,” and his solution is to support the creation of a free and eternally beautiful virtual environment. “Reality has had 5,000 years to improve, and it’s clear that it’s still sorely lacking for most people,” he said in response to the potential criticism that it should be improved rather than provide a virtual environment for the majority of people, “We should be building—and are building—online worlds that make life, work and love wonderful for everyone, no matter what level of reality deprivation they find themselves in.”¹⁹The entrepreneur’s business plan is obviously appealing: let’s

17 You could take them as ignorant and egotistical, like Marc Andreessen’s “The Techno-Optimist Manifesto.” <https://a16z.com/the-techno-optimist-manifesto/>.

18 Thomas Piketty: “Brahmin Left vs Merchant Right: Rising Inequality & the Changing Structure of Political Conflict,” PSE Working Papers hal-02878211, HAL, 2018.

19 N. Soldo: “The Dubrovnik Interviews. Marc Andreessen: Interviewed by a Retard,” *Substack*, 31 May 2021.

send the impoverished off to play in virtual worlds, and those who have access to real-world privileges will wind up enjoying the real world on their own.

It's also important to note that the founder of right-wing accelerationism, Nick Land, has once stayed in Shanghai. In a 2004's essay, he expressed his amazement at the political potency of Chinese-style socialism, which combines capitalism with Marxism. He maintained that China was an accelerationist civilisation because of its quick development and curiosity with the future.²⁰ Not only Elon Musk, who has established a Tesla plant in Shanghai, is among many who openly or covertly applaud the "Chinese model" these days.

Maybe the coalition between academic intellectuals and tech elites won't last long. Several big American corporations, for instance, have already dismantled the DEI departments they set up in recent years. Intellectuals always see themselves as the winners in this system, but they don't realise that the tech oligarchs, who have the terrifying ability to genuinely transform the world, cannot be their real partners. What steps will intellectuals in China, America, and Europe take then? Time might be running out. According to Tocqueville, we are "sleeping on a volcano."²¹

Rousseau du desert
5 December 2024

20 Nick Land: "China's great experimentalist," *Shanghai Star*, 2 November 2004.

21 Alexis de Tocqueville, "Gale of Revolution in the Air," 29 January 1848, Speech Vault. http://www.speeches-usa.com/Transcripts/alexis_deTocqueville-gale.html.



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