

News

The Mighty Qin

Searching for the beginnings of libertarianism in ancient China and coming up with a chop suey of statism

By Phil Maymin

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People tend to feel ideas that were first or ancient have an extra degree of legitimacy. It's why both the Christian and Muslim holy books incorporate the older Hebrew Bible and why the Hebrew Bible itself incorporates stories dating all the way back to creation. It's why believers in freedom often search for the earliest libertarians.

Some influential libertarians, including David Boaz of the Cato Institute and economist Murray Rothbard of the Austrian School, look as far back as ancient China and claim that Laozi, the founder of Taoism, was the very first libertarian because he argued for the elimination of the state.

But another libertarian, Auburn University philosophy professor Roderick Long, points out that Laozi's utopian vision was more like enforced anarchy, as it involved "no writing, education, material improvements, curiosity travel or trade."

Long argues the early Confucians may be the better model. While not as radically anti-state as the Taoists, they at least revere commerce, civilization and language. "Their overall program," writes Long, "looks more like contemporary libertarianism than the Taoist program does."

I think both views are wrong. Neither the Taoists nor the Confucians were libertarians. Both philosophies were part of the Hundred Schools of Thought, a 500-year cultural and intellectual renaissance from 770 to 221 B.C. That period also saw the emergence of the School of Naturalists, who synthesized the now ubiquitous Yin-Yang duality; the School of Mohism, who promulgated hippie-like universal love; and others that concentrated on agriculture or diplomacy or the military.

They are all merely variants of statism — because of who was supporting these philosophers. Long explains: The Zhou dynasty had collapsed, leaving a lengthy period of political fragmentation. "As the empire split into independent states, scholars competed vigorously for the chance to serve as political advisors to the emerging new regimes," he says. "It is from this situation that Chinese philosophy emerged." In short, every one of these philosophies tried to justify their particular sponsor's rule.

Not a single one of them is libertarian. Libertarianism means freedom, not rule from above. It's the people's philosophy, not the king's.

Perhaps we are wasting our time looking for the first libertarians. Perhaps we should be more worried about the future than the past.

Do you know what happened to all of these Chinese philosophies? The Qin dynasty eventually took over the land and ruled over 40 million people, roughly the population of the United States at the time of our Civil War; the Qin philosophy was the School of Legalism, which argued that people are inherently selfish and need strong, harsh discipline from above. All schools of thought other than Legalism were banned.

In just two decades, the Qin state centralized legal codes and bureaucratic procedures, centralized money, centralized transportation, banished or killed all dissenting scholars and burned their books, confiscated weapons from the people, established a draft, built enormous public works like canals and bridges to strengthen imperial rule and held frequent military expeditions to expand their empire. Sound familiar?

The legacy they left of centralized bureaucracy in China lasted for two millennia. It continues to this day.

We are seeing an American Qin emerge in our country. Our new government-sanctioning school of thought is sharing and socialism and collective responsibility. That explains why we have a central bank, high taxes, strict gun laws, large public works and frequent war. Dissent is not tolerated. Liberty has rusted to a relic.

Do modern Connecticut Yankees have it in them to fight for freedom one more time? Or have they successfully put us back in the statist bubble from which we popped after Puritan times?

We wonder who was the first libertarian. But perhaps the more appropriate, though sadder, question is: Who will be the last?



Laozi (left) and Confucius: Like the ineffectual Democrats and Republicans of feudal China

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