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## EMPIRE AND POLITICS IN EASTERN AND WESTERN CIVILIZATIONS

M.N.S. Sellers

To speak of “empire” today is to evoke the history of China and of Rome, two great empires that vastly influenced the culture and development of half the globe.<sup>1</sup> The whole world has been touched by their powerful examples, so that even someone writing, as I do, in a distant corner of North America, feels the history and influence of the Roman and Chinese empires every day. Nor are they unique. Something like “empire” has arisen wherever there was wealth and stability to support it. Rome and China had numerous rivals in the East and West who aspired to empire and sometimes achieved it. But Rome and China will remain the focus here because they are the paradigms of eastern and of western empire that illustrate the broader proposition. The central and best (and worst) values of empire and politics are congruent and fully present in eastern and western civilizations, just as they exist in every civilization that contemplates humanity and justice. Empire, politics, and the principles that rule them can be found in every culture, because they ultimately rest on reason and human nature, which are universal and accessible to every human being.

The English words “politics” and “empire” arise from Greek and Roman experience, but seek to embody universal values, or at least presume to do so. Comparing empire and politics in China and in Rome is not just a descriptive or a sociological exercise, but a normative inquiry. Like the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Huiqin Feng and Ellen Pruitt for their suggestions and criticisms of this chapter.

Chinese and the Romans, we must ask ourselves not only what empire and politics are, but what they ought to be, and why we should care. China and Rome both encouraged highly sophisticated scholars, who thought deeply about justice, human nature, and the public good. Small wonder then that they agreed on many things, and that we may learn from their perceptions. The same is true of empire and politics in every civilization. The universal foundations of justice and good order are present in every cultural tradition, even when they do not triumph as they should.

The study of Rome and the Roman heritage that guides European culture, like the study of China and the many cultures of the East, is beautiful in itself, through appreciation of what they were, accomplished, and left behind. But the study and comparison of Rome and China is useful also for the insights the history and ideas of eastern and western civilization can give us today, to shape our current world. The concepts of “empire” and “politics” represent human realities that will require consideration as long as there are human societies to discuss them. China and Rome considered them first, and often better and more deeply than those who came after. Modern principles of global justice, reflected in such documents as the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reflect values already deeply studied and understood in China and in Rome, as in many other places and cultures.

1. *Empire and the Politics*

The concepts of empire and politics inevitably connect, because both address the structure of society, and how society shall be ruled and made useful. “Empire” concerns the *right* to rule (*imperium*), who rules whom, and where. “Politics” concerns *how* to rule and be ruled (*politika*), in concert with other human beings. Both ideas depend on a third, sometimes expressed with the word “republic” (*res publica*), which is to say the common good or the public welfare, taken as the proper purpose of human society. This clarifies the normative element in politics and empire. Neither is justified unless it serves the public good. Politics is the science by which we seek to establish a just society. Empire is the power conferred on individuals or on institutions in pursuit of a just society. Politics and empire can be good or bad, true or false, legitimate or illegitimate, depending on whether and how well they fulfill their allotted task.

Humans still build and maintain empires today. Societies develop politics and public life. We still evaluate these efforts in the light of the public welfare and the common good. Thus, the history and experiences of Rome and China give us insights into truths about empire and politics that remain useful and -- in some cases -- inspiring today, because human beings and human nature have not changed. The wide sweep of Roman and Chinese history gives us a vast range of examples and the distance to evaluate them calmly, without partisan emotion. Both empires aspired to global community, and the peace that follows from global authority.

To write in English about Rome and China introduces the pitfalls of translation. Empire, politics, and republic are all English words with English implications. Yet the ideas they express and even the words themselves developed from Roman concepts such as *imperium* and *res publica*, or

Greek words such as *politika* and *politeia*. Therefore, English speakers and indeed scholars everywhere in the West, rely on the Roman conceptions of *imperium* and *res publica* and Greek conceptions of *politika* and the *politeia* that are deeply embedded in our history, culture, and ideas. They also represent universal human reality and universal human questions. The same ideas can be found in China -- and everywhere -- expressed in words that never correspond exactly. Yet they express the same reality of human needs, desires, and emotions. Every culture can and should share in this community of global justice.

## 2. *Politeia and Res Publica*

To speak of Roman politics and empire one must begin with Greece, because Rome's favored models were Greek, both in philosophy and in practice. Plato's *Politeia*, considering the right structuring of the *polis*, profoundly influenced the Romans -- and those who followed their example. Plato argued in his *Politeia* that rulers should always serve their subjects' common interest. Or at least he made Socrates say so.<sup>2</sup> In his book on the *Laws*, Plato denied that any supposed laws can be law at all, in any useful sense, unless they serve the welfare of the people as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Cicero adopted this precept from Plato, and gave Plato the credit for insisting on it.<sup>4</sup> "Politics" concerns the right ordering of government to maintain a just society, establishing the common good.

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Politeia*, I.xv.342E.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Nomoi*, IV, 715B

<sup>4</sup> M. Tullius Cicero, *de officiis*, I.xxv.85.

Roman thought reflected and shared these universal purposes. Cicero wrote his dialogues *de re publica* and *de legibus* to celebrate and modernize Plato's discourses on the state and on the laws. Both insisted that government and laws exist to serve the common good of the people, not their rulers. Magistrates must serve the common good of the *whole* people, not just one faction. Serving one part of the people would betray the rest. Cicero praised Aristotle for having been, like himself, a disciple of Plato in pursuit of the common good.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle followed Plato in believing justice to consist in government for the public welfare, securing liberty against the despotism of private interests.<sup>6</sup> Politics, understood in this way, concerns -- or should concern -- the science of just government for the good of all those subject to its rule.

Politics, as Aristotle explained it, as Cicero followed him in understanding the problem, and in its best and most useful sense in the Western tradition, is the study and practice of seeking the right ordering of society for the benefit of all. Like Plato, Aristotle criticized government maintained in the factional interest of any one, few, or many citizens. Government in the service of any faction is tyrannical by definition, and therefore wrong. Better, Aristotle explained, to mix monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy together, balancing one against the other, to prevent any one faction from abusing the power of the State. Aristotle endorsed the sovereignty of the laws,<sup>7</sup> to secure justice, which means the common good of the community as

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<sup>5</sup> M. Tullius Cicero, *de legibus*, III.vi.14.

<sup>6</sup> Aristoteles, *Politika*, III.iv.7.

<sup>7</sup> Aristoteles, *Politika*, III.vi.13.

a whole.<sup>8</sup> Politics is the art of perfecting the *politeia* or the “*res publica*”, as the Romans would express it.

### 3. *The Common Good*

The purpose of politics in Roman civilization was service to the “*res publica*”. *Res publica* signifies the public welfare or the common good, adapting Plato’s “*politeia*” to serve Roman reality. In his discourses *de re publica*, *de legibus*, and *de officiis*, Cicero set out the proper purpose of government as pursuit of the public good, in support of the republic, which is say, a just or well-ordered state. Cicero defined the purpose of government as being to create a harmony from the disparate interests of all members of society<sup>9</sup>, repeating Plato and Aristotle’s commitment to help all social groups live worthwhile and fulfilling lives. Put in Chinese terms, the empire should establish a harmonious society (*he xie da tong she hui* 和谐大同社会).

Cicero’s commitment to the common good simply follows and elaborates the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle. What distinguishes fully Roman and republican doctrine from its Academic and Peripatetic antecedents is not commitment to the public welfare, which they shared, but rather Cicero’s attempt to develop a more specific constitutional prescription for securing the republic

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<sup>8</sup> Aristoteles, *Politika*, III.vii.1; 13.

<sup>9</sup> M. Tullius Cicero, *de re publica*, II.lxii.69: “ut enim in fidibus aut tibiis atque ut in cantu ipso ac vocibus concentus est quidam tenendus ex distinctis sonis, quem inmutatum aut discrepantem aures eruditae ferre non possunt, isque concentus ex dissimilarum vocum moderatione concors tamen efficitur et congruens, sic ex summis et infimis et mediis interiectis ordinibus ut sonis moderata ratione civitas consensus dissimilorum concinit; et quae harmonia a musicis dicitur in cantu, ea est in civitate concordia, artissimum atque optimum omni in re publica vinculum incolunitatis, eaque sine iustitia nullo pacto esse potest.”

through popular sovereignty, elected executives, and an independent senate.<sup>10</sup> Cicero's conception of politics was more developed than that of Plato and Aristotle because he paid more attention to the forms and procedures of government. Cicero cared not only for the substance of republican government, which is the public welfare, but also for the structures and techniques of government, which make the common good real.

Cicero concerned himself with the republican *form* of government. How to discern and implement the common good through a well-designed politics became the main focus of his inquiry. Would-be republicans must design institutions through which to control the tyranny of factions and powerful individuals. This would become the greatest political legacy of Rome. Like every other regime that has ever sought power, the Romans claimed to rule for the good of their subjects. Rome surpassed its predecessors in attention to the *mechanics* of public welfare. Political science begins with Roman interest in the optimum constitution of the state.<sup>11</sup> Where Chinese and Confucian tradition focuses on the *principles* of government, the Romans spoke more of the *structure* of government -- but the purposes were the same.

#### 4. *Imperium*

Empire is a much more distinctively Roman idea than politics. "*Imperium*" signifies legitimate political or military authority. Later, in the English language, as in many other modern languages

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<sup>10</sup> See M.N.S. Sellers, "Cicero's Conception of Liberty" in *The Sacred Fire of Liberty* (New York, 1998), pp. 43-46.

<sup>11</sup> See M.N.S. Sellers, "The Origins of Republican Legal Theory" in *Republican Legal Theory: The History, Constitution, and Purposes of Law in a Free State* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 6-15.



that take their vocabulary from Rome, empire came also and even primarily to signify the actual territory over which a person or a polity exercises its legitimate authority. Thus we speak of “The Roman Empire” or “The Empire of the Romans”, but in either case there is an implication of *legitimate* authority. “*Imperium*” is not simply *dominium* (mastery). Nor is it this merely *potestas* (power). *Imperium* claims the moral right to rule and be obeyed. In China, this would correspond to the *tian ming* (天命), securing the legitimate right to rule.

Empire, like politics, derives its legitimacy first and above all from service to the common good. Romans followed Aristotle and Cicero in viewing the exercise of *imperium* in pursuit of anything but justice as tyranny. Livy praised the establishment of an “*imperium legum*” or “empire of laws”, supplanting the “*imperium hominum*” or “empire of men”. He admired the early days of Rome, when “*imperia legum potentiora fuerunt quam hominum*”.<sup>12</sup> Rome had a republic, Livy suggested, only so long as Roman magistrates maintained the rule of law for the good of the people. When the rule of law died, so too did liberty, and the republic was gone.<sup>13</sup> *Imperium* loses legitimacy unless exercised in the interest of the republic, for the benefit of the people, according to the rule of law.

These simple conceptions of empire and politics, as understood in Rome, could vest *imperium* in the people, in certain magistrates, or even in Rome herself, as Rome began to conquer her neighbors. The concept was extended to give Pompey “*imperium maius*” against the pirates.

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<sup>12</sup> Titus Livius, *ab urbe condita*, II.i.

<sup>13</sup> Titus Livius, *ab urbe condita*, praefatio, 9.

Then Augustus and his political heirs claimed *imperium maius* as “*principes*”, even in Rome. Ulpian asserted that the Roman people had transferred their *imperium* and *potestas* to these now perpetual *principes* or “*imperatores*”, who became the Roman “emperors” in English idiom.<sup>14</sup> The implication remained that emperors and princes only retain *imperium* because they serve the common good of the people. To do otherwise justified their replacement, by the very people they had ceased to serve.

### 5. *The Principles of Empire*

“Empire” is a western and a Roman word, embedded in English and many other languages by the weight of centuries of history. Yet we also speak in English of “emperors” in China, where Chinese might have said *huang di* (皇帝). This use of a western word to describe an eastern ruler is a necessary element of translation, but also reflects a deeper truth. Many of the same principles can be found in Rome and in China, because they are universal principles, deriving from universal human nature, reflecting human emotions, which are as present in China, or Korea, or any other large eastern political society as they were in Rome or are in the United States of America or France or any large western society.

Thus, eastern and western civilizations share the concept that government should be for the common good, that politics should seek the common good, and that empires and emperors are

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<sup>14</sup> Digesta, I.4.1: “Quod principi placuit, legis habet valorem: ut pote cum lege regia, quae de imperio eius lata est, populus ei et in eum omne suum imperium et potestatem conferat.”

only legitimate when they serve the welfare of all those subject to their rule. These principles are universal principles because they are *correct* principles, which therefore can be found in every culture. They supply standards by which we can measure any regime or any political society, because it is these principles alone that properly confer the right to rule. Governments profess to serve justice and the common good (whether they actually do so or not), because to disrespect the public welfare would invite rebellion, and rightly so.

The eastern tradition of empire has many variants, realized differently in many different lands and different periods of time. They also have many similarities, and among these concepts of “empire” and “politics” not very different to those one finds in the west. As in western civilization, “empire” and “politics” have been challenged, violated, and contested in the east, without ever receding, at least at the theoretical level. The words and language used were different, but human nature remained the same, and therefore the same fundamental concepts disputed in Rome are present in China, and throughout Asia.

#### 6. *Standards of Legitimacy*

The guiding observation made here is that the universal standards of legitimacy that ultimately justify or censure any government can be found in every culture. Empire and the political power of emperors or other rulers is justified because they implement justice to the greatest extent possible. When emperors fail to do so, they lose their legitimate right to rule. Rulers can and often do propose other standards of legitimacy, to justify their unjust regime, but these are

neither valid nor persuasive. Thus, every empire *must* claim to serve the common good and all of them have claimed to do so. The highly developed Chinese and eastern imperial traditions necessarily contain the same universal and correct principles that can be found in the west, and specifically in Rome.

The comparison of concepts of politics and empire in eastern and western civilizations is instructive because it confirms the universality of the underlying principles. More important, comparison reminds us that the full theoretical foundations for a just political order are present in all political and philosophical traditions. We can always construct a just society out of our own cultural resources, if we so wish, without reference to foreign ideas. Foreign comparisons assist us in discovering the most useful elements of our own tradition.

Comparing eastern and western conceptions of politics and empire can also help to reveal which elements in each tradition are underdeveloped or overlooked. This is a subtler point. Looking at my own world from the outside helps me to see it better. Mistakes go unexamined when they are taken for granted. Reflection through comparison clarifies what the fundamental requirements of just politics and legitimate empire really are. Whenever the existing political leaders in the East and West seek to establish a more just society, they have the cultural support to do so.

## 7. *The Chinese Empire*

When western writers speak of the “Emperor of China” they refer to the *huang di* (皇帝), who claimed to enjoy *tian ming* (天命), or the “mandate of heaven”, to rule for the benefit of all the world. Expressing these ideas in English will be necessarily inexact, just as expressing Roman ideas in English is necessarily inexact. The Latin, Chinese, and English words all echo the same reality, that imperial authority is or should be conditional on properly fulfilling the imperial duty, to serve the common good. Just as Roman and Western conceptions of “empire” and “politics” must accommodate the actual requirements of justice, so Chinese conceptions of the *huang di* (皇帝) and *tian ming* (天命) include the fundamental ethical concepts of a just society, and all that entails.

For example, the concept of *da tong* (大同) in Chinese tradition reflects the same perceptions that guided Cicero and Aristotle in discussing the common good.<sup>15</sup> Some translate *da tong* (大同) as “great unity” or “great community” or “great harmony”, essentially, the well-ordered or just society, which is to say, the society that serves the public good best. In the *li yun* (礼运) chapter of *li ji* (礼记) (the Book of Rites), Confucius (孔子 *kong zi*) is made to speak of the age of “*da tong*” (大同), when mankind practiced good faith, and lived together in affection. Dr. Sun Yat Sen (孙中山 *Sun, Zhongshan*) insisted that the purpose of the Republic of China was to bring about *da tong*(大同), the community of all humanity, in

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Albert H.Y. Chen, “The Concept of Datong in Chinese philosophy as an Expression of the Common Good”.

much the same way that Cicero spoke of the community of all humanity,<sup>16</sup> or Christian Wolff spoke of the *civitas gentium*.<sup>17</sup>

The Confucian (孔子的, 儒家的) concept of *ren* (仁), often translated as “benevolence”, indicates that a well-ordered society begins with care for the welfare of others, or of the people as a whole, and not simply oneself. As in Rome, the position of *huang di* (皇帝) became hereditary in China, without losing its conditional nature. The unjust ruler could lose *tian ming* (天命) “the mandate of heaven”, if he did not serve the people well. This justifies a right to replace an unjust ruler, as Mencius (*meng zi* 孟子) explicitly stated<sup>18</sup>, when the ruler ceases to rule with benevolence -- for the benefit of the people as a whole. One can compare this to John Locke’s “appeal to heaven”, which may itself reflect the influence of Chinese ideas.

Thus all the cardinal virtues and concepts of Roman and Chinese empire and politics find correspondences in the parallel culture. These correspondences are not exact, but they are close enough that each can sharpen and improve its meaning and self-understanding by attending to the other. *Ren* (仁) and *humanitas*, *yi* (义) and *ius*, *li* (礼) and *fas*, *zhi* (智) and *sapientia*, *xin* (信) and *fides*, *de* (德) and *virtus*, *xiao* (孝) and *pietas*, *tian ming* (天命) and *the pax deorum* these are not the same, but they attend to the same

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<sup>16</sup> M. Tullius Cicero, *de legibus*, I.v.16.

<sup>17</sup> Christian Wolff, *Jus Gentium methodo scientifica pertractatum* (1749).

<sup>18</sup> “Meng zi li lou shang” (《孟子·离娄上》)

aspects of universal human nature, and draw on the same necessary elements of justice, present in and applicable to every human society.

### 8. *The Conflict of Politics and Empire*

The concepts of politics and empire in Rome and in China are related and complementary.

*Empire* concerns the right to rule: who rules whom, and where. *Politics* concerns how to rule and be ruled: how to construct the best possible structure for society. But empire and politics may also conflict, or differ, because an empire or emperor can dominate and ultimately overwhelm useful politics. This happened Rome and China and will be a risk whenever politics convey power to individuals, which must be done, to secure justice. Give power to an *imperator* or a *princeps*, and politics in its most useful sense may recede. “*Quod principi placuit legis habet valorem*”<sup>19</sup> is not a good political principle, but it is very appealing to princes.

Both politics and empire have the same object, which is the common good, but their emphasis is slightly different. The concept of empire recognizes the value of political unity, universal values, and coordination, with an emphasis on right answers and the ultimate aims of government. The concept of politics concerns the procedural methods by which we secure justice and the common good in fact. Empire looks to the ends of government, politics to the means of securing them.

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<sup>19</sup> Digesta, I.4.1.

Every ruler, every prince, and every would-be emperor who has ever claimed power has readily accepted what I call the “republican principle” of government -- that the proper purpose and only justification of government is justice and the common good of the people. Not every emperor so readily concedes what I have called the “republican form” of government -- the checks and balances and divisions of power in politics that make real justice possible.

### 9. *The Limits of Empire*

The word “empire” in English as in other European languages came to have the implication not only of legitimate jurisdiction, but also of universal jurisdiction. Both China and Rome presumed to rule or at least direct the entire civilized world. At a minimum the word “empire” implies very broad political and legal jurisdiction, incorporating many different societies and many different peoples. The claim here is that to achieve global justice (*huang quan* 皇权) we will need a global power (*potestas*), or at least a global authority (*auctoritas*) (*sheng xian* 圣贤), to regulate our disputes and secure our common welfare.

Both the Romans and the Chinese and other Europeans and Asians and others have seen some value in this approach, securing global justice, or at least regional justice, or at least peace (of some description) and security through the imposition of empire on entire regions of the world. The goal is the broader good of the whole, imposed through the power of the empire, rather than by regional politics. This price of this empire is the loss of politics, raising the question



whether justice and the common good are possible without politics, without some recourse to the republican *form* of government.

Now finally it may be possible to imagine an empire without emperors, reconciling the conflict between the emperor and politics that arose both in China and in Rome. Since the conclusion of the Second World War there have been a series of efforts to create international organizations to advance international justice, peace, and security, at the global and the regional levels, such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the Organization of American States. None of these efforts have yet yielded robust international politics, but all have advanced the common good to some extent, extending the global rule of law, without recourse to a single powerful emperor. The legitimacy of these new empires without emperors depends on their service to global justice and the common good of their subjects -- just as it did in China and in Rome.

## 10. *Conclusion*

Comparing Eastern and Western conceptions of *politics* and *empire* remind us that the intellectual foundations for a just society exist in every cultural tradition. There is no exact correspondence between Roman and Confucian principles or vocabulary, but *both* reflect a sophisticated understanding of universal human nature, including the moral requirements of political justice, which are the same everywhere. This leads to significant similarities in perception and terminology, reflecting inescapable reality.

The task of scholars in every nation is to identify and make known the enlightened and humane concepts of politics and empire that exist in every cultural tradition. This is not to deny the sad and corrupted elements that also exist everywhere in the world, as they do in every human heart. But political decency has also always been present, and deserves our attention. The only legitimate purpose of politics and empire in the East and in the West today, as in the history of China and of Rome, is to serve and create a common good for all the people that they rule. This purpose has long been recognized and deeply embedded in our cultural traditions. We should make it ours.