

Preface to Chinese translation of *The Origins of English Individualism*

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Why I wrote the book

When I wrote this book I was searching for was an understanding of the roots of my own identity, as well as the central quintessence of the individualist, industrial and capitalist world in which I had grown up. What I discerned was a great shock to me. It was the opposite of what I had been taught in much of my University education. It was very different from the accepted wisdom of many of my teachers and colleagues.

I found a long term and continuous history of a form of what has been called 'possessive individualism'. That is a respect for individual rights, in particular private property rights, which had existed over many hundreds of years. I also discovered how very peculiar the English system was when compared to China, India and most other west European countries. The English system was curious both in its long-term continuity and in placing the individual at the heart of the economic, moral and political system.

This discovery is important because England (and later Scotland, Wales and Ireland), became the source of much of what we now call 'the modern world'. This occurred both through the influence of the great nineteenth century British Empire, and by way of the civilization which took most of its character from England and then magnified its effects, namely the United States.

In this book I have suggested that the English legal system, with its emphasis on private property rights, its separation of the economic from the social world, the (almost) complete equality of men and women, the balanced and open political system, was very unusual. But this unusual system has now spread over much of the world and much of it having penetrated Japan from the later nineteenth century is now providing models for the great Chinese transformation.

This book was the start of an adventure. Other episodes of that adventure are told in later books, especially *The Culture of Capitalism* (1987), *The Riddle of the Modern World* (2000) and *The Making of the Modern World* (2002). These continue down the path of understanding of our strange predicament and the nature and roots of our modern world. Every great journey, Confucius reminds us, starts with one step. This book is the first step in a new direction and hence, in some ways, my most original book.

One of the main purposes of the book was to clear away the ground to allow a new understanding. If we are going to put up a new building, say the great opera house in the centre of Beijing, we must first clear the site. This book is a site clearing operation. This explains why I was quite critical of some of my contemporaries and immediate predecessors. Yet I also reached back and praised a generation of earlier

scholars whose work had been overlaid but provided a much firmer foundation for understanding what has happened in the world.

My challenge to the major orthodoxy that was current when I was writing was serious. I was questioning much of the historical paradigm upon which many historians were building their projects. I began to realize that the over-simplified version of the Marx-Weber framework for the understanding of the transition from feudalism to capitalism was wrong. Yet my own views were such a departure from the received dogma, that I was labelled a heretic. My apparently absurd and counter-intuitive hypothesis, challenging the central narrative of how the modern world emerged, was thought to be a wild and unlikely speculation.

One of the leading historians in the world at that time likened it to the attempt of Einstein to overthrow the Newtonian cosmology. If I were write, he wrote in his review in the *New York Review of Books*, I was 'the Einstein of history'. Yet he quickly reassured his readers that I was clearly wrong, so they need not change their views. In fact, my ideas, I am told, are now very widely accepted among historians, although there are still disputes about the details. The central parts of the previous paradigm has been quietly abandoned by most of the next generation.

It seems likely to me that in order to understand China's past and present, Chinese thinkers will have to unlearn a great deal of the teaching of recent generations, as I also had to do. Marxism took over British history for a generation (c.1945-1975), as it did at about the same time in China. Chinese readers may find analogies to the lumping and distorting tendencies of their historical tradition to those I expose here.

What I have learnt since the book was published

I wrote the book when I was aged thirty-six. I believe that it is still substantially correct. Yet if I were writing it now, nearly thirty years later, I would add some extra features to the system I described.

The book represents individuals like atoms or balls, that float freely in a market system. That now seems to me only to be possible because of something else which I failed to emphasise at the time. This is what is nowadays called 'civil society'. The individuals were not single atoms, but joined into voluntary clumps or groups known as 'associations'. These gave meaning and power to their lives and acted as a thick layer of organizations between the individual and the State. These were clubs, churches, companies, educational institutions, sporting institutions and many others. England, like America, was famous for the diversity and freedom of its associations.

These associations allowed the individual both to be free, but also voluntarily to join 'bodies' larger than him or herself. Whether it was an orchestra, a choir, a local charity, a sports team or a thousand other groups, the individual partly merged themselves into something larger, which provided the richness and strength of the society. This is the bedrock of the 'democracy', in the wider sense, upon which formal Democracy was built.

I would also now lay more emphasis on a balanced political system which allowed and reflected the economic and legal individualism. The book mainly deals with

economy and society, but the context of a surprisingly de-centralized administrative system is very important. The balance between different political forces in which none pre-dominated, whether the King, Lords, Parliament or common people, over a period of hundreds of years is very difficult to maintain. Usually one or other of these grows more powerful at the expense of others. But if, as in the English case, the balance can be maintained, what emerges is what we call 'Democracy'.

I would now also draw more attention to the unusual social structure, though this is discussed towards the end of the book. Most of Europe, India and China in the past consisted of a small, literate, birth or education-based, ruling class who were strongly separated from a mass of fairly impoverished, illiterate, rural producers, often called peasants. England was famous for having a large middling strata of shop-keepers, tradesmen, manufacturers, craftsmen, farmers and others. They were not the supreme rulers, but nor were they peasants. This gave the English an unusual self-confidence and wealth.

I have also begun to understand the origins of the peculiar system I describe somewhat better. In the book I ended my search backwards in about 1200 AD and speculated that perhaps England had always been different. I thought that perhaps its roots lay in the 'Germanic woods' of which Montesquieu wrote. Further research suggests a different pattern. I now believe that all of western Europe was very similar in the seventh to eleventh centuries. England was no exception, though it did have unusual centralization and a unity of economy and law which was different in degree to most areas.

It was really only after the eleventh century that England began to become different. This was not really so much because England changed rapidly, but rather because it remained the same in its basic structure, while on the Continent very large changes were taking place. The normal tendency of agricultural civilizations, can be seen repeated several times in Chinese and Japanese history, as well as continental Europe. This is for the centre to become more powerful, reflected in more absolute and uniform bureaucratic, administrative, legal and political systems. In the west, for example, these only began to collapse again in the late eighteenth century. Yet England had never followed this tendency. It was unified and integrated, but had not moved towards absolute monarchy.

Why might all this interest a Chinese audience?

Over the last five years I have begun to know China a little. My wife and I have made three trips, visiting the north-west (Liaoning and Beijing), the centre (Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan) and the south-west (Chengdu, Kunming). I have started to teach a number of Chinese students in Cambridge and have a growing number of Chinese friends. From all this I have begun to appreciate that many Chinese are keen to learn how western civilizations developed and works. They are trying to adapt the best blueprints of how an open, wealth, tolerant and fair society can be created and maintained.

In this process of learning, it is not too difficult to discover how to adopt technical and scientific blueprints from the west. These can, more or less, be taken 'off the shelf', because technology is often self-contained and not too difficult to describe or

master. It is far more difficult to understand what the essential social and political structures are, that is the inner culture of a civilization.

If the complex balance of economic, social, political and cultural forces is not accurately described, it will make it impossible to understand. The stereotypes which I criticize in this book are, I believe, misleading. The 'revolutionary' model, whereby England was just like every other peasant civilization until the 'watershed' period of 1450-1650, and then mysteriously 'broke away' (like part of an ice pack), to become the first modern capitalist nation (alongside the Dutch), is wrong. The error covers over the truer and much more interesting story of the way in which various balances, between centre and region, individual and society, people and rulers, actually shifted over time.

The philosopher and economist Adam Smith stated that if wealth was going to be created, then a country needed 'peace, fair taxes and a good administration of justice'. This is very difficult to provide and has hardly ever been achieved by any large country for more than a few years or decades. The English system, with some failures at times, did manage to provide these three things more or less continually for about eight hundred years after 1066. This allowed a small, remote, island to introduce a new way of life onto this planet (industrial civilization), and for a time to control the largest Empire in history.

It is difficult to maintain the balance between contending pressures. So I hope that some understanding of how the English managed to do this may interest Chinese readers. They will see how, having achieved this balance, the British then transferred it through their law, language, industry, science, literature, political and social systems (as well as their games and associations) to America, Europe, and then to India, the Pacific and Japan.

The movement of knowledge between China and the West

My four visits and travels across China have reminded me of the strange see-saw of history. For a thousand years, to about 1400, almost all the flow of knowledge and technology was from China to Europe. We all know that most of the great inventions occurred in China and that it was cultural centre of the world. Europe was, in some ways, just a minor off-shoot of China (and India).

Then there occurred a period of about four centuries from 1400 to about 1800 when there was a balanced and mutual exchange. Then for about two hundred years the exchange went the other way, with inventions and force coming into China from Europe and later America. Now there is once again a growing balance. Mutual understanding is beneficial for proper exchange and this book tries to help that understanding of some of the most complex inner features of western civilization.

In this short account, written almost like a detective story I have tried to pose a problem: why does England feel so different to both the Continent and the rest of the world, certainly until very recently? I have chased the causes back through time. I tried to convey the excitement and surprise of the discovery, which when I made it was as amazing to me as to anyone else. If it excites and surprises my Chinese

readers, I would be delighted. When I wrote it in 1977, I never imagined that one day I would be introducing it to a Chinese audience.

Yet we now live in an increasingly inter-linked world. In Britain we are deeply interested in ‘Things Chinese’, and I know that many in China are sincerely interested in ‘Things Western’. This book may therefore be of interest in various ways.

The book combines history and anthropology. It is comparative, sets up explicit models to test hypotheses, and works backwards through time, rather than forwards. It is also based on both general ideas, and very specific local studies of particular people and communities which have been reconstructed from the local records. Its conclusions are ambitious and at a world level, even if they are founded on a particular history.

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I am deeply grateful to my friend Xiaolong Guan for adding to her earlier translations by taking on a very tough and technical challenge in translating this book. I know, from the high praise of her work on the translation of *The Glass Bathyscaphe*, that it will be done to the highest standards. Without her, and the interest and support of the publishers Commercial Press, this could not have happened.

If you want to see my answers to some of the criticisms people made of the book and my replies to these, or the local study of an English village upon which some of the most technical arguments are based, or to discover the developments of many of the arguments in later years, see my web-site www.alanmacfarlane.com.

I very much hope that readers will find the book opens their eyes and makes them understand better the largely hidden forces which are pulsing through China from the west.