**上海外国语大学 2020 –2021学年第一学期**

**期末考试试卷**

课程名称 中国文化概要

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**Please write an essay about 500-800 words in English, explaining a cultural phenomenon in China. A comparative perspective is encouraged.**

**“Progressive” Texts in Ancient Classics**

In the presentation we did in this semester, I and my teammates briefly explained why there were abundant number of so called prodigies emerged in the ancient records written in the years of the Three Kingdoms and the Jin dynasty, and one of the main causes we presented to the class is that these prodigies were the representatives of an ambitious gentry class, and there was a never ending war among the gentry, the emperor, and almost everyone around the imperial throne like royal family members, ministers, officers, armed force leaders, nobles, intellectuals, et cetera.

In the west, the highest authority was never completely controlled by one single man or woman, there was quite frequently a powerful circle of nobles (and capitalists in the nearer era) behind or against the kings and emperors. We have the Senate in ancient Rome, we have Magna Carta in medieval England, and we have all kinds of constitutional monarchies and republics in the modern days.

This political phenomenon is deeply rooted in the western culture, and it, quite bizarrely, had a counterpart in the culture of China which, in its 5000-year history, never had a modern-like republic or a constitutional monarchy naturally spawned. In ancient classics, we can read texts like “民为贵，社稷次之，君为轻” from Mencius, which basically means that the people is the most important to a nation, then the country itself, and rulers are at the least important position. There also is “水可载舟，亦可覆舟” from Xunzi, which means that people can crown a king like water uphold a boat, they can also uncrown a king like water turn the boat over. These ancient texts are all sound rather “progressive” to a modern ear, and our ancestors usually put the tag of “wise and virtuous ruler” on any emperor who has a reputation of value his people highly. But, like I pointed out before, China’s political system was never evolved to a stage that can be defined as republic or democracy before its natural evolution process was disrupted by outside forces after the Opium War. So why there are so many “progressive” thoughts in the ancient classics?

Well, my personal opinion is that the authors of these “progressive” texts have no intention to overthrow monarchy and build people’s republic. Monarchy was the only way to rule in their knowledge, and we should not put unrealistic expectations on them that they can think beyond their time and suddenly realize the existence of an alternative option that requires a series of strict preconditions. The reason they left so many texts of this kind is that they, like those prodigies, are just representatives of a social class. They were nobles in Pre-Qin period, they were gentries in years from Han to Sui Dynasty, they were bureaucrats and intellectuals in years from Tang to Qing Dynasty, and they never were truly the people of modern understanding. Their urges, persuasions, or even threats in classics that rulers should love “people” were, of course, containing some elements that can be described as progressive even by today’s standard, but one also couldn’t deny that these sages were inevitably and unintentionally bound by their social class identities, and would naturally lead them to use (at least part of) their voice to consolidate or even expand their share of political power, economic interest and social status.

It’s a normal and natural part of our history, and cannot be simply categorized as benign or vicious. What we should do is to abstract progressive part from these ancient texts, and absorb them as healthy elements into a future oriented thought system.