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Mengzian Socialism as Remedy to Imperialism: The Mengzian Roots of Kotōku Shūsui’s *Imperialism: Monster of the Twentieth Century[[1]](#footnote-1)*

1. **Introduction**

Historians have long considered Kōtoku Shūsui 幸德 秋水 (1871-1911) a pivotal Meiji (1868-1912) intellectual who translated, disseminated, and propounded socialist and anarchist political thought. Historian John Crump has called him a “towering personality” in the history of Japanese anarchism (1993, 160) and his 1903 *Essence of Socialism*  “the most celebrated theoretical work written by any socialist in Japan in the Meiji era” (1983, 59).

In recent years, scholars have begun to acknowledge Kōtoku’s seminal role in the history of anti-imperialism (Tierney 2015). As Japan’s foremost public intellectual during the first decade of the twentieth century, Kōtoku was the leader of Japan’s anti-war movement, which culminated in the publication of his 1901 book, *Imperialism: Monster of the Twentieth Century*. One of the earliest general accounts of imperialism to ever be written, *Imperialism* advanced a novel argument concerning the nature, origins, and solution to imperialism as a global problematic. While existing scholarship has accentuated the socialist components of Kōtoku’s anti-imperialism, this paper examines Kōtoku’s use of Confucian philosophy, most notably the *Mèngzǐ* 孟子,[[2]](#footnote-2) in his critique of imperialism. Though acknowledged in the literature, no systematic discussion of Kōtoku use of Mencian philosophy has been pursued; a lacuna this paper intends to fill.

This paper argues that Kōtoku articulates a “Mengzian-socialist” political theory which hybridizes Mengzi’s moral psychology and theory of political legitimacy as residing in the welfare of the people (*mínběn* 民本) with socialism’s commitments to international solidarity and concern for the material conditions of the working class. In so doing, Kōtoku’s reimagines the moral-political basis of legitimate government; a reimagining which highlights the politics of collective identity formation during the turbulent times of Meiji Japan. This paper thus reaffirms and extends Sharon Sievers claim that Kōtoku is best read neither as a Marxist nor simply a socialist, but as belonging to a “radical Confucian tradition” (1969, 117).

As a lesser known figure in the history of political thought, I first introduce Kōtoku Shūsui before providing an overview of the context of Meiji Japan and the reasons why political theorists ought to consider Kōtoku’s *Imperialism* an important text in the history of political thought. I then offer an overview of Kōtoku’s theory of imperialism, followed by an account of its Mengzian roots. In the final section of the paper, I articulate Kōtoku’s Mengzian socialism and elaborate how it solves the problem of global imperialism that Kōtoku identifies.

1. **Kōtoku Shūsui: Meiji Intellectual and Dissident**

Born on September 22, 1871, Kōtoku Shūsui (born Kōtoku Denjirō 幸徳 傳次郎) was Japan’s foremost public intellectual in the first decade of the twentieth century. Raised by a widowed mother with dwindling finances,[[3]](#footnote-3) Kōtoku displayed great intellectual gifts, despite being a sickly child, and attended both public school and a private academy for the study of the Confucian classics.[[4]](#footnote-4) In 1888, Kōtoku became a household student of Nakae Chōmin 中江 兆民 (1847-1901), then Japan’s leading leftist intellectual and translator of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. Chōmin’s influence on Kōtoku was decisive, and instilled in him the importance of reading the *Mengzi* and the *Zhuangzi*.[[5]](#footnote-5) Kōtoku would cite Chōmin’s personal influence as well as his text, *A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government*, as among his reasons for avowing socialism.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In 1897, Kōtoku joined the *Yorozu Chōhō* 萬朝報, Japan’s bestselling newspaper in the early 1900s famous for its critical social commentary. Using his position at the newspaper, Kōtoku criticized Japan’s interference in China during the Boxer Rebellion between 1899-1901, and the Japanese army’s looting of Beijing in particular. From then on, “Kōtoku emerged as a public intellectual and leader of the radical opposition to the Meiji regime” (Tierney 2015, 25).

In 1901, Kōtoku helped establish Japan’s first socialist political party, but it was banned by the government shortly after its founding. In 1903, Kōtoku and other socialists formed the Society of Commoners, or *Heiminsha* 平民社, which published Japan’s first socialist and pacifist newspaper, the *Heimin Shinbun* 平民新聞 (*The Commoner’s News*). The group was driven by the ideals of liberty, equality, fraternity, socialism, pacifism, and the promotion of the commoner class (Elison 1967, 443). During the Russo-Japanese War, Kōtoku would continue his anti-war criticisms of the Japanese government. In response, the government imprisoned the newspaper’s editor, and subjected the newspaper’s sellers to police harassment.

In November 1904, the *Heimin* *Shinbun* published the first Japanese translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, reigniting the ire of the government. For translating and publishing it, Kōtoku was sentenced to five months imprisonment. After his release in the winter of 1905, Kōtoku travelled to California, where he encountered the American anarchist movement, precipitating his conversion to anarchism. Kōtoku returned to Japan in the fall of 1906 and began advocating the anarchist tactic of direct action and general strikes, foregoing electoral politics as an avenue for achieving progressive change and fracturing Japan’s fledgling socialist movement.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In 1908, the newly-elected Katsura government announced a policy of eradicating socialism. Thereafter, Kōtoku and Japan’s radical movement faced heightened government repression. In June of 1910, Kōtoku was arrested for his supposed involvement in a plot to assassinate the emperor. The Meiji Constitution regarded the Japanese emperor as a living god; crimes against the royal family were therefore a higher class of crimes, for which capital punishment was the appropriate sentence. Early the next year, Kōtoku was sentenced to death after a hasty trial, which was closed to the public, and in which not a single witness was called.

On January 24, 1911, Kōtoku and eleven other radicals were hanged.[[8]](#footnote-8) The trial reinforced state power and made attacks on the imperial institution taboo. The notion of an anarchist conspiracy to assassinate the emperor discredited dissidents and chilled opposition. “In the immediate aftermath of the trial and the execution of twelve of the defendants, the left-wing movement in Japan entered a period known as the ‘winter years’” (Mackie and Yamaizumi 2013, 4). Many historians have since concluded that the High Treason Incident (大逆事件 *Taigyaku Jiken*) was likely a government-concocted plot to eliminate the leaders of Japan’s radical movement.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Until 1945, Kōtoku was widely regarded as a terrorist. His reputation has since improved and is now considered a martyr of Meiji absolutism and serves as an icon for Japan’s pacifist movements. Similarly, *Imperialism* was banned not only by the Japanese government after 1911, but also during the U.S. occupation of Japan between 1945-1952, probably because Kōtoku condemned U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. Only after the end of the U.S. occupation would it once again see the light of day.

1. **The Context of Meiji Japan: The Road to Imperialist World Power**

The nineteenth century was a turbulent and transformative period of Japanese history. As historian Marius Jansen summarizes, “Japan, which began the Meiji period as one of the modern world’s most fractured polities, emerged within a generation as one of its most centralized states” (2002, 334–35). The Meiji Restoration combined, in Mark Ravina’s words, radical nostalgia with cosmopolitan chauvinism: “Radical nostalgia refers to the invocation of the distant past to promote radical change in the present” (2020, 9); “Cosmopolitan chauvinism posited that certain great universal truths had been discovered outside Japan. Although discovered abroad, these ideas were universally applicable and would therefore enhance rather than degrade Japanese culture” (Ravina 2020, 11). Thus, the 1889 Meiji Constitution combined both authoritarian and liberal-democratic principles. On the one hand, it proclaimed that sovereignty was vested not in the Japanese people but in the person of the emperor, whose divine ancestry stretched back into Japanese antiquity in an unbroken line of succession. While factually inaccurate, it formed a central pillar of Japanese nationalism. On the other, the constitution established a bundle of limited civil liberties and a house of representatives. Thus, though Japan would eventually devolve into authoritarianism and later ultranationalism, an alternative path of slow democratic reform had been open.[[10]](#footnote-10)

A central impetus driving Meiji transformation was the threat of Euro-American imperialism. In 1853, Matthew Perry arrives to force open Japanese ports to U.S. trade. Perry sails his Black Ships towards Tokyo and fires blank shots from the ship’s seventy-three cannons. In 1854, Perry returns and Japan signs the Treaty of Kanagawa under threat of force, officially ending Japan’s isolationist foreign policy. The 1858 Harris Treaty opened more Japanese ports to U.S. trading ships and granted extraterritoriality to U.S. nationals in Japan. In August of 1863, British ships bombed the city of Kagoshima after the death of a British merchant*.* And in 1864, in an attempt to force open more trade ports, a joint expedition of British, Dutch, French, and American forces assaulted the city of Shimonoseki*.* All these incidents taught the Japanese just how willing Western powers were to back up their demands with military force*.* It also made evident the palpable threat of Japan being colonized. For many Japanese, the lesson was clear: “armaments are a measure of the achievement of each nation. War is a thermometer that tests the strength of each nation’s civilization” (Chōmin 2015 [1887], 94).

By the end of the 1800s, however, Japan had become the most industrialized nation in Asia*.* And with newfound confidence in its industrial might, Japan sought to mimic Western powers and expand beyond its geographic borders*.* “As arguably the only imperialist victim to later become a colonial power, Japan came late to the game of imperialism, taking it first colony, Taiwan, in 1895” (Huffman 2010, 3)*.* But before expanding overseas, Japan first secured its own internal borders: the northernmost island of the Japanese archipelago was annexed and renamed Hokkaidō in 1869. As with other settler colonial regimes, the Indigenous Ainu population was forcibly assimilated.In 1876, Japan used gunboat diplomacy to open relations with Korea and foisted on its neighbor its own version of an unequal treaty. In the south, too, Japan annexed the former Ryūkyū Kingdom, which was renamed Okinawa Prefecture in 1879.

On August 1, 1894, Japan declared war against China. Japan won the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, forced an indemnity of 350 million yen, and claimed Taiwan, causing a wave of triumphant patriotism to ripple through Japan. In 1900, Japan sent a force of 10,000 troops to China to end the Boxer Rebellion. In 1904, the Russo-Japanese War broke out over competing imperial ambitions in Manchuria and Korea. Japan’s victory secured its rights over southern Manchuria and the recognition of Japan’s interest in Korea. The Treaty of Portsmouth was excoriated by the public, however, because Japan’s victory had won it neither territory nor an indemnity. So, in the fifty-five years between 1850 and 1905, Japan underwent nothing short of a military metamorphosis: from a target of Western aggression to the greatest aggressor in all of East Asia.

Japan’s move toward imperialism also highlighted a contradiction: on the one hand, supporters of Japan’s modernizing project vehemently opposed Western imperialism and the unfair treaties imposed on Japan from abroad. Yet, they nonetheless supported Japanese imperialism in Asia. Their view was premised upon the belief that imperialism was a uniquely Western phenomenon. Nationalism, then, shaped perceptions of imperialism; a phenomenon all too true outside of Japan as well. Many ostensibly anti-imperialists in Britain, France, and the United States denounced some imperialist actions, while neglecting or condoning others. Patriotism and nationalism frequently served to deflect criticisms of imperialism towards other countries, while obfuscating domestic militarism and imperialism; a dynamic given voice to Kōtoku in his analysis of the causes of imperialism. General, principled arguments against imperialism were rare; Kōtoku’s treatise is one such principled argument, making it a unique treasure.

1. ***Imperialism* as an Important Text in the History of Political Thought**

*Imperialism: Monster of theTwentieth Century* was published in 1901 and is a collection of edited articles that Kōtoku published between 1900 and 1901. Like many works of the period, *Imperialism* was written in *kundokubun* 訓読文, “an adaptation of classical Chinese [and] lingua franca of Japanese intellectuals…accessible as well to literate East Asians because of the classical Chinese grammatical structures” (Tierney 2015, 11). For this reason, it had considerable influence not only in Japan but across East Asia.[[11]](#footnote-11)

There are (at least) four reasons to view *Imperialism* as an important text in the history of political thought. First, Kōtoku provides a general account of modern imperialism from the standpoint of a non-European citizen. A core feature of modernity is Eurocentrism; that is, interpreting and judging human affairs from the standards and perspectives of Europeans. Yet, as Kōtoku demonstrates in this text, Japan too was an imperialist power. All too often, historical and political accounts of modern imperialism treat it as an exclusively Euro-American phenomenon. Imperialism, according to this Eurocentric account, is something done by “the West” to the “non-West.” As the translator of Kōtoku’s work, Robert Tierney, argues, Kōtoku’s “*Imperialism* is virtually unknown in the English-speaking world because, until recently, Japan has occupied a marginal and barely visible place in general histories of empire. As a non-Western empire, Japan was ‘unmarked as a colonizer in Euro-American eyes’” (2015, 1). So Kōtoku provides a useful corrective, questioning the Eurocentrism inherent in many historical and contemporary accounts of imperialism; Japan was a major imperialist force in East Asia, a fact with which any general history or theory of imperialism must contend.

A second reason to read Kōtoku’s imperialism is that it is one of the earliest general accounts of imperialism to ever be written. *Imperialism: Monster of the 20th Century* “was among the first studies of imperialism to be published anywhere in the world” (Tierney 2015, 1). It preceded other famous accounts of imperialism, such as J. A. Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study* by one year, and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*—probably today’s most renown account of imperialism—by sixteen years. Kōtoku’s treatise, while being among the earliest, does, however, draws substantively from John Robertson’s 1899 *Patriotism and Empire*.

While indebted to Robertson’s focus on patriotism, there are significant differences between Robertson and Kōtoku’s works. First, unlike Robertson, Kōtoku was a socialist and argued that imperialism cannot be resolved by modest economic reforms, but only through the establishment of a socialist economic and political system. Second, unlike contemporaneous European accounts such as Robertson’s, Kōtoku deemed Japan an imperialist powers. And third, Kōtoku, reflecting Japanese intellectual culture, hybridizes Confucian and socialist sensibilities: his critique of imperialism is a Mengzian-socialist critique (as will be explored in greater detail below). This is a third reason to view Kōtoku’s work as an important text in the history of political thought: a distinctive feature of Japanese intellectual history is the translation and transformation of ideas of non-Japanese origin. Kōtoku is heir to this tradition and invites us to think creatively about the means by which distinct traditions of thought might be woven together: what would Mengzi, or other traditional philosophic figures, have to say about modern imperialism?[[12]](#footnote-12)

Finally, a fourth reason to read Kōtoku’s *Imperialism* lies in its unique account of the causes of imperialism. Kōtoku’s account of imperialism is predominantly psychological and Kōtoku treats imperialism as a pathology of the nation-state, a “plague” caused by patriotism and militarism (Kōtoku 2015, 206). This is in direct contrast to thinkers like Vladimir Lenin, who articulate economic-centered theories of imperialism: “(1) the concentration of production and capital… (2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital…(3) the export of capital…[acquiring] exceptional importance; (4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist associations…and (5) the territorial division of the world among the biggest capitalist powers” (Lenin 1975 [1917], 244). Economic-centered theories of imperialism, however, fail when applied to the case of Japan. “In 1901, Japan had no advanced industrial sector or surplus capital available for export…Indeed, Japanese imperialism preceded the development of a strong capitalist sector or the accumulation of surplus capital, reversing the order of the [Lenin] hypothesis” (Tierney 2015, 7). So, “Kōtoku lays great stress on political factors precisely because he was writing from the perspective of a citizen of Japan, where such factors had a preponderant influence on government decisions” (Tierney, 8).[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. **Kōtoku’s Analysis: What is Imperialism and What are its Harms?**

Kōtoku begins his text by diagnosing a central problematic of his time, the ascent of imperialism to the status of a planetary phenomenon:

Imperialism spreads like wildfire in an open field. All nations bow down to worship this new god, sing hymns to praise it, and have created a cult to pay it adoration…In England, both government and citizens have become fervent acolytes of imperialism. In Germany, the war-loving emperor [Wilhem II] never loses a chance to extol its virtues. As for Russia, the regime has long practiced a policy of imperialism. France, Austria, and Italy are all delighted to join the fray. Even a young country like the United States has recently shown an eagerness to master this new skill. And, finally, this trend has reached Japan. Ever since our great victory in the Sino-Japanese War, Japanese of all classes burn with fever to join the race for empire, like a wild horse suddenly freed from its harness. (Kōtoku 2015, 139)

In short, Kōtoku diagnoses imperialism as both a geopolitical imperative and an object of adoration. He tells us that “no politician, of any stripe can hope to be appointed as cabinet minister in any national government unless he agrees to serve the cause of imperialism. And no government that renounces imperialism will gain the respect of other nations” (Kōtoku 2015, 139). So imperialism, on both domestic and international fronts, is something no politician or government can avoid: support for imperialism has become a threshold for entry into institutional politics.

Yet, Kōtoku questions this political reality. “In the final analysis, what virtue, what power, and what value does imperialism possess, that it is able to inspire such fervent devotion in its acolytes” (Kōtoku 2015, 139-140). The primary aim of Kōtoku’s text is thus to analyze the value of imperialism. What explains the rise of imperialism to the status of a major force in the modern world? For what reasons has it become an object of adoration? What are its causes, its consequences, and its solution?

Kōtoku defines imperialism as “the policy of territorial expansion” which often “means the construction of a great empire” (Kōtoku 2015, 186). In short, then, imperialism is the acquisition of foreign territory through military force. As for its primary causes, Kōtoku summarizes the main thesis of his treatise as follows: “Isn’t imperialism derived from patriotism and militarism? These constitute the warp and woof from which the fabric of imperialism is woven” (Kōtoku 2015, 143). Imperialism, then, is simply patriotism mixed with militarism. But how do patriotism and militarism cause imperialism?

First, patriotism. Kōtoku claims that imperialism is linked to love of one’s country, to patriotism. Imperialists cry out: “Let’s increase our population, expand the size of our territory, build a great empire, raise the national prestige, and bring glory to our flag” (Kōtoku 2015, 142). Imperialists, then, want national prestige and glory. Their concerns are centered on a kind of “care” for their own country and their fellow citizens. In Japanese, patriotism combines the character for “love” or “care,” *ai* 愛, and the character for “country” or “nation,” *koku* 国. So it literally means love of or care for one’s own country.

But why does patriotism, care for one’s country, exist at all? “Why,” Kōtoku asks, “do people feel an emotional attachment to their native land and their country? Why do they have to love their nations?” (Kōtoku 2015, 143). Importantly, Kōtoku’s claim here is both descriptive and normative: people do, as a matter of social fact, feel an attachment to their country. But, he also says that they “have to,” so there’s some sort of force or norm impelling citizens to love their country. As will be revealed by his analysis, the force impelling patriotic sentiment is the modern nation-state.

But first, let’s examine Kōtoku’s account of how emotional attachments to one’s own country are formed. Kōtoku compares the love of one’s own country to nostalgia; both emotions share “the same source” (Kōtoku 2015, 145). Nostalgia arises only once one leaves one’s hometown: “A man only longs for his homeland and the place of his birth after he learns that there are foreign towns and countries” (Kōtoku 2015, 144). That is, once you go somewhere different. But, not only that, in order to feel nostalgic, one has to *compare* one’s own to something new *and also dislike* what is new and different. It’s the dislike of difference that creates the emotion of nostalgia. Nostalgia, as the dislike of difference, can rapidly veer into hatred.

Like nostalgia, then, Kōtoku sees patriotism as something formed by comparison with and dislike of others; a dislike that can swiftly descend into hatred. Patriots compare their country and culture with those of other countries, see differences, come to despise those differences, and hence citizens and countries other than their own.[[14]](#footnote-14) Unmasking the true motivation underlying patriotism as not love of one’s own but dislike, even hate, of others, Kōtoku calls patriotism “a war-like feeling that incites those who feel it to consider it an honor to subjugate foreigners and foreign countries” (Kōtoku 2015, 148); patriotism, in other words, is easily channeled towards expansion and the subjugation of foreign nations.

In addition to unmasking the true motives of patriots, Kōtoku views love of one’s country as a selfish, partial love for two reasons. First, because it extends only to others deemed “truly” patriotic and, second, because it stops at national borders. So-called patriots in England and America, Kōtoku remarks, “revile fellow citizens…and condemn their hatred of their own country” for opposing the war in Transvaal (a reference to the First Boer War) or the American intervention into the Philippines (Kōtoku 2015, 143). Moreover, “A patriot who does not care for the people of other countries and only loves his fellow countrymen is like a man who only loves members of his own family and immediate relatives and is indifferent to everyone else” (Kōtoku 2015, 144). Patriotism, then, creates a double divide: a domestic division between “true” patriots and the unpatriotic (or, more forcefully, “traitors”), and a geopolitical division between one’s fellows citizens and foreign nationals. The creation of this double divide becomes a sine qua non of imperialism. It is this common dislike of others that forms the social glue which binds individuals into political factions: “we must acknowledge that [patriots’] unity, friendship, and sympathy only derive from the existence of a shared enemy and is merely an ancillary reaction to their hatred of the enemy” (Kōtoku 2015, 148).

What motivates patriots to love and care for their nation, then, is self-interest. It is not true, dispassionate care or love, which Kōtoku likens to the spontaneous concern one would feel for a child about to fall into a well, an example drawn from Mencius (which we will explore further below). Patriotism is selfish and partial because it harnesses humanity’s innate propensity to identify emotionally with others and channels it into noxious in-groupings that limit one’s care to like-minded citizens. In this way, it is unlike the selfless empathy that motives someone to save an *unrelated* child about to fall into a well. Patriotic love, as a love that stops at national borders and “true” patriots, can only be a self-interested: it is to be indifferent and uncaring to those outside of one’s own national borders and those deemed unpatriotic. Not only does patriotism channel aggression towards foreign expansion, it demonizes domestic opposition to policies deemed “patriotic.” The consequence of being branded a traitor is severe: “anyone who challenges the conventional wisdom of the day is muzzled and forcibly restrained” (Kōtoku 2015, 150-151).

While human attachment has always been partial to those closer to us (closer in both social and geographical senses of the term), in the modern world these patterns of emotional identification, Kōtoku contends, have transmogrified:

As society has gradually evolved in accordance with the principle of survival of the fittest and the means of communication and transportation have unified the different regions of the world, the members of other races and other villages who used to constitute a common enemy have decreased in number and the hatred that united men against them has started to lose its object. If they lose a common target of hatred, then they can no longer find a common cause to unite with their neighbors. At this point, their love for their country, their community, or their village undergoes a change and simply becomes a sentiment that they feel toward themselves, their families, and their groups. At the same time, the war-like instinct that governed relations between different communities or villages of the barbarians also changes into competition among individuals, rivalry among political parties, and struggle among the different classes of society. (Kōtoku 2015, 148)

Kōtoku maintains that modern, industrial societies transform pre-modern patterns of emotional identification. The feelings of compassion and hatred that people used to feel between villages and other groups are redrawn and competition between individuals, political parties, and economic classes now takes central stage. These new feelings of individualistic, political, and class identification, moreover, are tapped into by capitalists seeking profit and politicians seeking power and glory. For Kōtoku, economic and political elites “seek to divert the hatred that individuals feel toward one another onto foreign enemies in order to derive profit for themselves. They reproach anyone who refuses to go along with the project by saying: ‘You are an enemy of the nation, a traitor’” (Kōtoku 2015, 149). In other words, this shifting pattern of emotional identification provides fertile ground for the manipulation of popular affect towards support for imperialism.

This is where the second component of Kōtoku’s analysis—militarism—enters. In the twentieth century, militarism has reached a crescendo. It’s impossible, Kōtoku says, to calculate how much money and how many lives have been wasted in the expansion of military power. “The defense budget imposes an enormous burden, at once material and moral, on the entire nation in order to allow the expansion of the army” (Kōtoku 2015, 163). But why is modern warfare not proportional to what is necessary for defense? And why do citizens condone, implicitly or explicitly, the enormous economic and moral burden of defense spending? This is a moral question not only because of the lives lost but also because that money could be spent elsewhere, say on domestic social programs or education. It is also a betrayal of the very values of the modern world: “The civilization of the twentieth century has transcended the morality in which the strong prey on the weak. But the nations of the world are still subject to the law of the jungle, with its wild beasts and poison snakes” (Kōtoku 2015, 185). The moral and political philosophy of modern Europe condemns domination and the rule of the powerful, yet international relations continues to be based on that very principle.

The logic used to defend geopolitical militarism, Kōtoku contends, is simple: “The people in country A say, ‘We desire peace, but the people in country B want war.’ The people in country B say, ‘We desire peace, but the people in country A want war’” (Kōtoku 2015, 164). Not only does this logic place the moral blame on other countries—domestic actors are simply “defending” themselves against aggressive foreign nations—it obfuscates and absolves a nation’s own domestic militarism. Cumulatively, geopolitics is transformed into a game wherein countries compete to “build the most elaborate weapons and the biggest warships” (Kōtoku 2015, 164). This game of military buildup threatens world peace by making territorial expansion a national policy and a geopolitical necessity. And the domestic burden of covering the costs of the military budget is “an immense drain on the nation’s productive capacity” (Kōtoku 2015, 184). Instead of using the money for the public good, it’s spent on militarism, to the benefit of economic and political elites. Even if military build-up leads to a temporary balance of power between Western powers, they will find every opportunity, Kōtoku argues, to colonize weaker nations in the global south.

Defense and self-protection, the usual justifications given for military build-up, then, are not the true causes of militarism. The true causes of military expansionism, Kōtoku contends, is elite interest and patriotism. Economic elites seek profit from the supply of munitions, and military elites seek pleasure in strategizing and developing new military technology. Patriotism, however, is the ultimate cause: “what enables military men and capitalists to gratify their greed is the possibility of stirring up a jingoistic and arrogant patriotism among the vast majority of the population” (Kōtoku 2015, 163). Militarism relies on the manipulation of patriotism; by stirring up strong patriotic emotions, militarists and capitalists are able to convince citizens that militarism is in their best interest. So, while “imperialism = patriotism + militarism,” patriotism, or the manipulation thereof, is the more important factor driving nations towards imperialism.

If militarism and imperialism are contrary to the interest of the majority of citizens, as Kōtoku suggests, then popular support for such policies must be manufactured. “The popularity of imperialism in the world today is really based on the manipulation of such feelings. It depends on the deliberate provocation of animal instincts” (Kōtoku 2015, 149). The link between militarism and patriotism thus becomes clear: political, economic, and military elites incite, channel, and manipulate popular affect so as to garner support for policies of military expansion. The distinctly modern feature of this phenomenon lies in the modern state’s basing its legitimacy on the “consent” of the governed. In the premodern world, elites could pursue imperialist policies whether or not they were politically popular, nor would they have needed to legitimize such policies through the language of the “will of the people”: “In the past, imperialism was a private matter but today it is a popular and national cause” (Kōtoku 2015, 188). Militarism is thus an ideology which serves the interests of a narrow slice of elites, but like all such ideologies, it must garner adherents to be securely implemented.

In sum, Kōtoku views imperialism as the result of a clique of elites—politicians, capitalists, and military leaders—who “channel popular affect to support expansion overseas by manipulating the bogeyman of foreign enemies but also to divert the attention of citizens away from domestic injustice and inequality” (Tierney 2015, 4). With the rise of industrial societies so too comes the ascent of nationalism and patriotism: individuals come to identify as “a people,” but what sort of “people” they identify as and how, remains malleable. And it is this malleability that Kōtoku sees driving public support for imperialism, and so its meteoric rise to global dominance. Kōtoku’s critique of imperialism, then, focuses on the psychology of popular affect, the nation-state, the formation of collective political identities, and the very structure of modern geopolitics.

1. **The Mengzian Roots of Kōtoku’s Critique of Imperialism**

Before I extrapolate the Mengzian roots of Kōtoku’s critique of imperialism, let me briefly introduce the *Mengzi* and its place in East Asian intellectual history.

Mengzi (391-308 BCE), or Mèng Kē 孟軻, lived during China’s Warring States period (403-221 BCE). The widespread chaos and misery of the period sparked a golden age of philosophy, known as the “Hundred Schools of Thought” (*zhūzǐ bǎijiā* 諸子百家), as thinkers sought ways to bring unity and peace to a troubled world.[[15]](#footnote-15) At the time of its composition (circa third century BCE), the *Mengzi* had a respectable but by no means commanding position in China’s intellectual tradition.[[16]](#footnote-16) After the Song (960-1279), however, the *Mencius* become required reading for the civil service examination, and for 600 years, between 1313 and 1905, the influence of the *Mencius* on Chinese society was second only to the *Analects*. The *Mengzi*’s defense of regicide against immoral and corrupt rulers and belief in political legitimacy residing in the material wellbeing of the common people made it a subversive text in both Chinese and Japanese intellectual history. In Japan, Tokugawa (1603-1868) rulers generally ignored or even suppressed the *Mengzi*, but it was a popular text among dissenting intellectuals (like Chōmin and Kōtoku).

Two direct references to the *Mengzi* appear in *Imperialism.* First, a reference to Mencius’ thought experiment about a child about to fall into a well. And second, a reference to Mencius’ view of the importance of maintaining courage in one’s convictions regardless of the consequences: “Mencius writes: ‘I refuse to yield even when millions oppose me if to yield is to betray my conscience’” (Kōtoku 2015, 177). The second reference reveals Kōtoku’s conviction to pillory imperialism whatever social cost he incurs and a view of social change which centers the uncompromising conviction of moral leaders. It is the first reference, however, which shows the Mengzian roots of Kōtoku’s psychological account of the causes of imperialism.

In passage 2A6, Mengzi states:[[17]](#footnote-17)

The reason why I say that all humans have hearts that are not unfeeling toward others is this. Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child’s parents, not because one wanted fame among one’s neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child’s cries. From this we can see that if one is without the feeling of compassion, one is not human…

Mengzi states that all humans dislike witnessing the suffering of others; a claim based upon a thought experiment: how would you feel if you saw a child about to fall into a well? Wouldn’t you feel a sense of distress, alarm, and compassion. And wouldn’t that feeling of distress be spontaneous? You’d think, OMG, that child is in danger! It is precisely the spontaneity of this emotion, for Mengzi, which is key; in the moment, your motives for feeling the way you do would be dispassionate. You wouldn’t, Mengzi believes, think to yourself, oh, I will feel this way because if I do, the child’s parents would become indebted to me. Nor would you think about how feeling this way would make others praise you. No, in the moment, you’d only be concerned with the child’s welfare.

Mengzi uses this example to show that humans can be motivated by altruistic and other-regarding concerns. Note that this example only mentions feelings, not actions; what matters is how you would *feel* in that moment, not how you would act (though actions should ideally follow from these feelings). And for Mengzi, that feeling is enough to say that humans, by nature, have the capacity to be good. Our emotions are thus our guides to doing and being good. For this reason, anyone who, in this situation, doesn’t feel a spontaneous burst of concern has lost some of their humanity. They’ve lost, or cut off, their natural capacity for compassion.

The emphasis on spontaneous emotion is central to Mengzi’s view of human nature,[[18]](#footnote-18) a view he expresses most vividly in passage 6A6:

As for what [humans] are inherently, they can become good. This is what I mean by calling their natures good. As for their becoming not good, this is not the fault of their potential. Humans all have the feeling of compassion. Humans all have the feeling of disdain. Humans all have the feeling of respect. Humans all have the feeling of approval and disapproval. The feeling of compassion is benevolence. The feeling of disdain is righteousness. The feeling of respect is propriety. The feeling of approval and disapproval is wisdom. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them.

Mengzi’s claim is *not* that humans—by mere virtue of being human—are good. The claim is that humans possess certain innate features, certain incipient tendencies, that can allow us to do and become good. Becoming good, then, does not require us to change our nature; our natural dispositions already allow for it. And the incipient tendencies that permit us to do and become good are a set of universally shared human emotions: compassion, disdain, respect, and approval and disapproval. Compassion leads us to act benevolently, disdain to act righteously, respect to act with propriety, and approval and disapproval to seek wisdom.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Mengzi refers to these four emotions as “sprouts” (*dūan* 端) of goodness. This agricultural metaphor is apt because Mengzi believes that, like the sprouts of plants, the sprouts of human goodness must be fostered in the right conditions in order for them to develop, grow, and flourish. In Mengzian moral philosophy, this is the idea of “extension,” *jí* 及or *tuī* 推 in Chinese. The basic thrust of this idea is that, seeing as humans have the innate capacity to feel compassions for others, the moral imperative is to cultivate this capacity for compassion and extend it outwards towards others as expansively as possible.

Let’s look at an example in the *Mengzi* to get a clearer idea. In passage 1A7, Mengzi chides the king of Qi for failing to extend his compassion to his subjects:

While the king [of Qi] was sitting up in his hall, an ox was led past below. The king saw it and said, “Where is the ox going?” Hu He replied, “We are about to ritually anoint a bell with its blood.” The king said, “Spare it. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground”… Mengzi said, “This heart is sufficient to become King.[[20]](#footnote-20) The commoners all thought Your Majesty was being stingy. But I knew that Your Majesty simply could not bear the suffering of the ox…. In the present case your kindness is sufficient to reach animals, but the effects do not reach the commoners… The commoners fail to receive care only because one does not use one’s kindness. Hence, Your Majesty fails to become King because you do not act, not because you are unable to act.” (1A7)

What this passage demonstrates is that the king of Qi has a feeling heart; he is able to extend his compassion to the ox. And because he has a feeling heart, he is capable of becoming a moral ruler. In not extending his compassion to include the commoners of his kingdom, however, the king is failing to exercise his moral duty. He is *capable* of being a moral ruler, but currently *his actions fail to live up to this possibility*.

How does one extend and develop their incipient moral dispositions? As Franklin Perkins argues, the key to decoding Mengzi’s view of cultivating feelings lies in the particularities of how we relate to others. “The process of cultivation is not one of creating emotions from scratch. We exist through felt relationships to the world, and many of these feelings are social and constructive. The process of cultivation stimulates, extends, and refines these feelings” (2022, 10). The emotional reaction of the king of Qi was unwilled; he neither wanted nor chose to feel compassion for the ox. Rather, it was the spontaneous result of witnessing the ox’s distress. It is a reaction that only makes sense given the particularity of the situation.

In the same passage, we learn that the king substituted the ox for a sheep. His compassion extended to the ox but not the sheep. Had the king seen the frightened expression of the sheep, he may well have spared it as well. “From the perspective of reason, the sheep and the ox have no relevant difference, but that is not how we experience them…Witnessing an animal being killed changes our relationship to it, but it is not a matter of gaining some new knowledge” (Perkins 2022, 111); rather, it is a matter of direct experience. Mencius’ criticisms of the king’s failure to extend his feelings of compassion to the common people thus lies in the fact that he fails to expose himself to the kinds of environments and relationships that would stimulate “the right feelings at the right moment”; that is, the king isolates himself from “direct engagement with the problems of the world” (Perkins 2022, 112-113). Such isolation prevents the king from the sorts of experiences that would foster his feelings such that his compassion would extend to his subjects, and so prevents Mencius’ ideal of humane government (*rénzhèng* 仁政) from being enacted.

An important premise of Mencius’ theory of extending one’s moral feelings towards others is the doctrine of differentiated care. Confucians, Mengzi included, believe that human love or care, *aì* 愛, is a form of particular attachment. Our emotional attachments are strongest to those closest to us and so differentiates between family, friends, lovers, acquaintances, and strangers. As David Wang explicates:

It is within the family, for instance, that the individual first learns to realize general ethical principles and concepts in his or her ways of thought, feeling and acting, and that is part of the reason why the family is such a prominent topic in Confucianism... When Confucians consider how love for all is to be made a reality, therefore, they turn to the family. This institution provides the first context in which love of others is learnt, and the habits of thought, feeling and acting that compose this love form much of the foundation of the individual’s character. (Wong 1989, 255)

As Mengzi says in passage 3A5, we feel greater attachment to our own family than the family of our neighbors. This, according to Mengzi, is the nature of human emotions; a nature he does not seek to transform. The human capacity for love and care is first molded within, and modeled upon, our primary relationships. So human emotional responses, in Mengzi’s words, is “one rooted” (*yīběn* 一本): centered in our own particular relations but containing the seeds to grow and extend outwards beyond own own particularity. One’s moral obligations to one’s family and those closest to them, in this account, generally possesses greater ethical pull.[[21]](#footnote-21)

That being said, differentiated care does not entail that one can treat strangers in any way whatsoever. On the contrary, it would be immoral not to save a baby who’s about to fall into a well, regardless of the child’s relation to you. That is the truly human way to respond: with a spontaneous burst of emotion which leads to moral action. But Mencius believes that the particularities of familial life possesses outsized influence on the cultivation of our innate dispositions and learned emotional responses. It is for this reason that Mengzi’s conception of extending one’s emotions outwards focuses on using one’s own family, or primary relations, as a model: “Treat your elders as elders, and extend it to the elders of others; treat your young ones as young ones, and extend it to the young ones of others” (1A7). If we imagine treating unrelated others as we would those with whom we have intimate relationships, we are more likely to develop our moral sprouts and form consistent habits that promote extended circles of care.

For Mengzi, the cultivation of one’s innate moral proclivities also entails specific socio-political arrangements. His account of moral psychology, then, is linked with his account of political legitimacy; an account of legitimacy known as *mínběn* 民本 legitimacy. Minben combines the character *mín* 民, meaning “the people” or “the masses,” and the character *b*ě*n* 本, meaning “root.” So literally *minben* means “the people as root,” but theoretically it entails, as a moral principle, that the wellbeing of the masses form the ultimate foundation for political legitimacy. *Minben*, then,is a way of measuring the rightful authority of the political order based on the degree to which it places the people’s prosperity at its foundation. In the words of Joseph Chan, it is a “service conception” of authority in which “political authority serves the interests of the people…rather than the private interests of the ruler” (2014, 31). Practically speaking, “The basic tenet of *minben* thought entails that the rulers, officials and government in general should secure the means of living for the masses” (Murthy, 2000, 33).

Mengzi expresses this view of legitimacy at the end of passage 1A7:

As for the people, if they lack a constant livelihood, it follows that they will lack a constant heart. No one who lacks a constant heart will avoid dissipation and evil. When they thereupon sink into crime, to go and punish the people is to trap them. When there are benevolent persons in positions of authority, how is it possible for them to trap the people? For this reason, an enlightened ruler must regulate the people’s livelihood to ensure that it is sufficient, on the one hand, to serve their fathers and mothers, and on the other hand, to nurture their wives and children. In good years, they are always full. In years of famine, they escape death. Only then do they rush toward the good, and thus the people follow the ruler easily.

The burden of legitimacy falls on the ruler. To be a humane ruler, one must secure a constant livelihood for one’s people. Only then will the common people have a constant heart. A constant livelihood—not being overly anxious about survival or the satisfaction of basic needs—leads to a constant mind: the kind of mental state that’s conducive to learning and moral cultivation. Moral cultivation cannot work if people are not in the right state of mind. A minimum level of socio-economic security is a prerequisite for moral education. Once a constant livelihood has been attained, Mengzi believes that humans should develop their moral capabilities through education and self-cultivation. Political-economic wellbeing is thus a basic precondition for the exercise of morality, at least at the societal level.[[22]](#footnote-22)

It is here that Mengzi’s view of legitimacy diverges from mere performance legitimacy: rulers must actively create the conditions that would make their subjects want to obey: secure their livelihood, shun disruptive wars, avoid onerous taxation, etc., all so as to create the conditions for the moral sprouts of the people to grow and flourish. As Joseph Chan argues, this is ultimately a perfectionist theory of legitimacy “because its ultimate basis is a certain conception of the good life” (2014, 172); in this sense, Mencius’ theory of humane government bears similarities of Amartya Sen’s ideal of “development as freedom” because economic sufficiency is seen as a minimum springboard for greater moral development (Sen 2000).

1. **Mengzian Socialism as Remedy to Global Imperialism**

As I’ve said, Kōtoku proffers a Mengzian-socialist critique of imperialism and the military industrial complex. So now that we’ve looked at Mencius’ account of moral psychology and political legitimacy, we can now see the Mengzian roots of Kōtoku’s anti-imperialism.

Mengzi and Kōtoku argue that an innate part of human nature is the feeling of compassion. That all humans have hearts that feel for others. And that compassion can be motivated, not out of the desire for reward or fame, but simply out of a concern for the wellbeing of others. They also tell us that in order to be a fully ethical human being, one ought to feel this sort of compassion and extend its reach as broadly as possible. To not feel compassion in this way is to not fully realize one’s capacities as a human being, who, by nature, possess innate moral dispositions. This is why Kōtoku frequently calls patriotism an animal instinct. Because patriots fail to extend their love and care more broadly, they fail to realize their full humanity.

Where Kōtoku goes beyond Mengzi, however, is in hybridizing this view of moral psychology with socialism’s commitment to international solidarity. In Mengzi’s one-rooted account, we develops our moral sprouts through our own particular relationships, especially within the family. Kōtoku’s account of the transformation of the patterns of emotional identification that accompany modernity, however, suggests that the centrality of the family unit and local, village life has weakened. Modern political structures result in the rise of individualistic, political, and class identification which were not as prominent in premodern societies. To avoid the problematic outcomes that can result from these forces—namely imperialism and elite domination—socialism becomes a necessary bulwark. For Kōtoku, “a patriotism based only on an empty pride in military victory and a hatred of enemy nations can only be a hindrance to the mutual respect and spirit of brotherhood among the different peoples of the world” (Kōtoku 2015, 157). The socialist phrase of “Workers of the world, unite!” would thus encapsulate the modern meaning of a fully developed form of Mengzian compassion: extending compassion towards others not based on artificial domestic or geopolitical boundaries erected through a manufactured and manipulated form of patriotism.[[23]](#footnote-23)

A second overlap between Mengzi and Kōtoku lies in the importance they place on the material wellbeing of the common people for a nation’s political legitimacy. Here we see a commonality between socialist and Confucian concerns: care for the common people. Kōtoku modernizes *minben* by concluding that the social preconditions necessary for securing the material wellbeing of the people is socialism. The problem with imperialism is that “A small minority of military officers, politicians, and capitalists block any improvement in the livelihood of the vast majority of the population, destroy their meager savings, and even take their lives in order to build their great empire” (Kōtoku 2015, 189). Rather than a nation-state that is monopolized by an elite clique, Kōtoku wants a nation that ensures continual social progress, and the wellbeing and happiness of all. Countries should therefore establish socialism:

the economic problems in the countries of Europe and the United States today will not be solved by oppressing the population of underdeveloped societies and making them buy their manufactured products, but rather by greatly boosting the purchasing power of the vast majority of people in their own countries. Boosting the purchasing power of the masses can only be achieved by prohibiting the excessive and monopolistic profits of the capitalists…we must radically reform the present system of free competition and establish a socialist system. (Kōtoku 2015, 197)

Imperialists claim that there is honor and glory in conquest, but what are its consequences? For the colonized, it brings devastation, poverty, inequality, and rebellion. But even for the colonizers, Kōtoku says it brings greed, corruption, and decadence. Imperialism only benefits a small clique of military officers, politicians, and capitalists who incite and manipulate popular affect to manufacture support for policies which further their own self-interest at the cost of the common good and the livelihood of the common people. The vast majority of citizens are left to pay the costs: the death of countless soldiers, the high economic costs, and a list of social problems that remain unresolved. Kōtoku thus rejects *the* central legitimating claim of imperialists—that modern imperialism represents the will of the people and a common good—and instead offers socialism as an alternative that would truly secure the people’s livelihood and represent the common good.

1. **Conclusion: Competing Stories of Peoplehood**

In reimagining the moral-political legitimacy of modern government though his vision of Mencian socialism, Kōtoku criticizes the politics of patriotic peoplehood that was dominant during his time. In the words of Rogers Smith, there are no primordial, pre-political senses of peoplehood. To make a people therefore requires a story of peoplehood: an ongoing project of “people building” or “people making” so as to create an imagined community of shared fates. The creation of a political people is crystallized in an asymmetrical manner, however, through the telling of stories by potential or actual leaders. While asymmetrical, Smith points out that for stories to be accepted—for a sense of collective peoplehood to crystallize—such stories need to overlap with what Smith calls “the three I’s—preexisting senses of identity, interests and ideals” (Smith 2003, 34). Thus, despite the asymmetry of people building, both leaders and led have meaningful, though varying, levels of agency. For the followers, “*architects of all forms of peoplehood are engaged in political projects that seek to* create *stable structures of power* enabling them to accomplish varied ends” (Smith 2003, 37). In this way, narratives of peoplehood both serve and constitute the interests of the people they form.

The story of peoplehood propounded by Meiji leaders encouraged the citizens to identify with the nation-state as *kokumin* 国民 (literally “state-people”) through the school and conscription system, as well as a national ideology. The jingoistic patriotism of the late Meiji period encouraged vertical ideas of peoplehood. The people were a people by virtue of being subjects of the Japanese state. But also based on a particular understanding of what it meant to be Japanese. It excluded a range of alternative possibilities, including liberal democracy, socialism, and other more egalitarian visions. As citizens of a state, they ought to identify in the ways state elites told them: along the lines of patriotic division that reinforced existing hierarchies. Insofar as they were *kokumin* or a state-based people, the Japanese were interpellated to identify above all else with the nation-state and support its military endeavors. By telling Japanese citizens that they were a people based on the state, this story of peoplehood valued militarism and imperialism, it pursued policies that benefited only a narrow elite, and it legitimized the political control of the Meiji elite through the claim that they represented the people and their interests.

Kōtoku, in his alternative Mengzian socialist vision of politics, offers an opposing story of peoplehood; a story of peoplehood that is based on the common people, or *heimin* 平民. “While *heimin* may be rendered as ‘commoners,’ a more accurate translation would be the nonelite, since the *heimin* included individuals from practically every social group”; “the *heimin* constituted a united from that encompassed artisans, farmers, merchants, and members of the middle class as well as factory workers” (Tierney 2015, 104). This contrasts them strongly with the small elite that Kōtoku depicts as benefiting from imperialism. During the Russo-Japanese War, Kōtoku also referred to the common people in Russia as heimin, which thereby marked the word as being cosmopolitan and inclusive beyond national boundaries. “By pitting the common people (*heimin*) against the state-centered citizens (*kokumin*),” Kōtokuappealed “to the people outside the framework of the nation-state [and he] articulated a vision of justice and international peace that offered an alternative to world imperialism” (Tierney, 2015, 11). “Whereas the citizen was defined primarily by his property of having a nationality and a nation, the *heimin* had neither. Just as [Mengzian] empathy was an advance over patriotism, *heimin* were superior to *kokumin* because they were linked to all other human beings in the world by empathetic feeling and solidarity” (Tierney 2015, 103). Kōtoku’s alternative to imperialism, then, was to conceive of peoplehood differently: to imagine a collective form of peoplehood based on their shared capacity for empathetic international solidarity, and common need for a secure livelihood that enables the development of one’s freedom and capacities.

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1. This is a draft intended for presentation at PTRW. Please do not cite or share without permission. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Conventionally, Mengzi has been referred to by his latinized name, Mencius, in English. In recent years, scholars working in Chinese philosophy have preferred to use the endonym over the exonym. In this paper, I use Mengzi and Mencius as well as Mengzian and Mencian interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kōtoku cites his impoverished upbringing as among his reasons for supporting socialism: “Born in Tosa and intoxicated by the thought of freedom and popular rights from my youth, I could hardly help but feel pity for my family and relatives, whose business declined after the Restoration, and experienced the bitterness and injustice of fate when I had to end my schooling due to a lack of money” (cited in Tierney 2015, 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kōtoku’s preference to spend his time reading indoors was such that his mother exclaimed that “while the wooden clogs of the other children were constantly worn out and in need of repair, [Kōtoku’s] always remained brand new” (Notehelfer 1971, 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kōtoku penname, Shūsui 秋水, was bestowed upon him by Chōmin and was taken from the title of the seventeenth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*; literally it means “autumn” and “water,” but figuratively it denotes melancholy and clarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, Gentleman’s query: “Why is it that, against all moral principles and economic laws, these [European] nations maintain standing armies of tens of millions that gnaw at their economies and make their innocent citizens slaughter each other in vain in a competition for glory?” (Chomin 2015, 50); it is this very question that Kōtoku makes central to his inquiry in *Imperialism*. In a modern world that claims to uphold the ideals of the French Revolution, on what basis can you justify imperialism? [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A view Kōtoku propounded in his essay, “The Change in Thought” (Elison 1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The American anarchist Hippolyte Havel wrote of Kōtoku’s death in *Mother Earth,* proclaiming: “In Denjiro Kotoku the international movement has lost one of its noblest representatives” (1911, 377). <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015014519279&seq=436>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. While there is widespread agreement of Kōtoku’s personal innocence, not all scholars agree that the broader anarchist movement was innocent of plans to assassinate the emperor. The original records of the trial, however, were lost in either the Great Kantō earthquake of 1923 or the firebombing of Tokyo during WWII; without these documents, no definitive conclusion can be reached. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A view given voice by Master Nankai in Nakae Chōmin’s *A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A Chinese translation of the text was published just a year later, in 1902, and a partial Korean translation in 1906. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Moreover, in addition to its philosophic content, by drawing on existing East Asian traditions, Kōtoku’s arguments would have had greater rhetorical appeal, resonating with an audience of Japanese citizens who shared his cultural background. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. As Tierney shows, the shadow of Lenin looms large in the history of scholarly appraisals of Kōtoku’s work. With Lenin’s view becoming socialist orthodoxy, Kōtoku’s account was judged against Lenin’s and found wanting for failing to provide an “economically scientific” account of the relationship between capitalism and imperialism. Only since the rise of postcolonial theory and criticisms of Lenin’s economism has Kōtoku’s work been newly appraised on its own terms. See Tierney 2015, 8-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Here, Kōtoku may be picking up on, and subverting, the argument made by Champion in Chōmin’s *A Discourse by Three Drunkards on Government*. Like Champion, Kōtoku see nostalgia as an important motivating force for imperialism. Yet, unlike Champion, Kōtoku suggests that what undergirds nostalgia is hatred of otherness. So perhaps lovers of nostalgia are not truly motivated by the love of the past, but by a hatred of novelty. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As Tao Jiang aptly avers: “The collapse of the normative Zhou order, which had represented the ideal of peace and prosperity, was the backdrop of all classical thinkers during the pre-Qin period. Almost all classical thinkers were trying to reconstitute such a lost order by appealing to ritual (or tradition), (human) nature, objective standards that included moral and penal codes, or some combination of these, in order to imagine, conceptualize, and construct a new world that was morally compelling and/or politically alluring” (2021, 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The *Mencius* consists of seven “books,” which are subdivided into halves (A and B), and the halves further subdivided into sections or “chapters.” The work purports to record the teachings and discussions of the historical Mengzi. However, only parts of Book 1 are likely to be the genuine sayings of Mengzi himself, recorded during his lifetime. The rest of the text would have been compiled by his disciples and his disciples’ disciples. Linguistic changes indicate that Books 4-7 were written later than Books 1-3. Like other works in early Chinese philosophy, then, the *Mencius* is best understood as a polyphonic work representinga Mengzian school of thought. As Tao Jiang argues, this requires a shift in interpretive frameworks from one of authorial intent to one of textual intent: “The concept of textual intent allows an interpreter to make use of the authorial personality created by the text, the textual author, by attributing intention to it in the interpreter’s effort to understand the totality of the text and to construct a coherent conceptual universe available to the text” (Jiang 2021, 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Here and below, I use Bryan van Norden’s translation (Mencius 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The character rendered “nature” here is *xìng* 性. As Franklin Perkin notes, “*xing* is not a state but a way of reacting and responding. The *xing* of barley is how it responds to sunlight and soil; the *xing* of human beings includes hunger for food but also absorbing culture and tradition” (2022, 33). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Through introspection of our judgements of approval and disapproval, Mengzi suggests that we can derive knowledge of the source of our moral judgements and the appropriate actions that our moral judgements demand in particular situations. These forms of knowledge constitute moral wisdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The word “King” here is capitalized because it refers to Mengzi’s moral ideal of a True King who institutes humane government (as opposed to those who are king in title only). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. A moral intuition borne out by the fact that many would consider it reprehensible for children not to care for their elderly parents in need of care, assuming they possess the means to do so, but morally unconcerning (or at least, less concerning) if one did not provide similar care for an elderly stranger. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Mengzi believes that certain extraordinary people could become morally virtuous without first achieving a constant livelihood. These individuals, however, remain a small minority. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. A view expressed in Kōtoku’s letter to Russian socialists during the Russo-Japanese War: “Comrades! Now the governments of Russia and Japan, each in order to advance its own imperialistic ambitions, have recklessly started the first of war. But for socialist eyes there is no difference in race, no difference in national boundaries, no difference in citizenship. You and we are comrades, are brothers and sisters; there exists absolutely no reason for us to fight. Your enemies are not the Japanese; your real enemies today are patriotism and militarism…The appeal of Marx, ‘Working men of all countries, unite!,’ must indeed be realized today” (Elison 1967, 443). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)