

OA.508

Liu Junning and Wang Yan (eds), Preface to Zhijie minzhu yu jianjie minzhu [Direct Democracy and Representative Democracy] (Beijing, 1998: SDX Joint Publishing Company; Gonggong luncong [Res Publica] series no. 5), 1–8

The editors praise IB for his vivid descriptions of Russian thinkers, showing us their suffering and dilemmas, caught between tradition and modernity. RT clears away prejudice against these thinkers, and teaches us how to study intellectual history. Chinese readers looking to this book to explain liberalism will find their sympathy for it deepened.

The choice of ‘Direct Democracy and Representative Democracy’ as the title reflects IB’s distinction between two concepts of liberty. The editors prefer representative democracy, criticising Charles Taylor’s communitarianism.

For IB, humanistic individualism and romantic nationalism are the two main currents of twentieth-century political thought. IB’s interview with Nathan Gardels, included in the book, seems to exhibit a communitarian or nationalistic IB. But if we read carefully, IB’s nationalism is different from communitarianism. Although he supports value pluralism and cultural diversity, he also insists on the importance of individual freedom within a communitarian context, as opposed to a communitarianism that erases individuality. The upshot is his liberal nationalism.

Although IB hardly mentioned East Asia, his political philosophy does apply to the Chinese experience in the twentieth century, especially when he criticises the abstract ideas which can lead to great disasters. Sympathy for Russia never left IB: after the Second World War it was worry about the destiny of liberty that led him to give up analytic philosophy for the study of political theory, the editors claim – he had learned from the Russian thinkers that when justice is fighting injustice, intellectuals cannot behave as neutral observers, but must take up arms. This is why IB became a sage of the last century. In this sense he is an heir to the nineteenth-century Russian thinkers.