Huang Zongxi was an important philosopher and author who worked to uphold Confucian principles of government after the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644. Huang roundly criticized tyrannical monarchies in favor of democratic principles long before Rousseau and Locke in the West.

Huang Zongxi was an important Confucian philosopher, political theorist, author, and historian living between the Ming and Qing dynasties. A versatile talent, Huang is widely acclaimed not only as the first serious scholar of Chinese intellectual history, but also as the first Chinese enlightened thinker.

Like his father who, being a member of the famous Donglin Academy (Eastern Grove Academy 東林書院), closely watched and boldly criticized the Ming court politics, Huang Zongxi joined a similar association of men of letters called Fushe (The Restoration Society 復社) and developed a keen interest in politics as Ming political crises deepened. After the Ming collapsed in 1644 under a nationwide rebellion and the Manchu invasion, Huang spent the next few years participating in a military movement aimed at restoring the Ming dynasty. When such efforts proved to be futile, Huang turned away from the actual politics and devoted the rest of his life to scholarly research and writing.

Huang’s writings covered many different areas from literary creation to studies of Confucian classics, history, geography, mathematics, astronomy, calendar, and music. His most influential works are Mingyi daifang lu 明夷待訪錄 (A Plan for the Prince, 1663) and Mingru xuean 明儒學案 (Records of Ming Scholars, 1676). Mingyi daifang lu comprises twenty short essays on the prince, ministership, law, eunuchs, subofficials runners, methods of selecting talents and officials, schools, the land and tax system, finance, the military, and so forth. Haunted by the Ming’s fall, like many of his Confucian intellectual contemporaries, Huang converted his energy into defending the Way of Governance (zhi 治) as an historical mission. In this effort, while drawing broad lessons from the Ming’s fall, Huang pushed the Mencian-type of criticism of tyrannical princes one step further. At a time when France was under Louis XIV and European royal absolutism was a dominant ideology and practice, Huang sharply attacked the autocratic monarch who treated the whole country (tianxia) as his private property, the ministers as his private servants, and the law as his own family rules. Huang proposed, in today’s words, a “gentry democracy” guided by Confucian moral principles and a doctrine of “government for the people.” Huang’s work was completed twenty-seven years earlier than John Locke’s Two Treatises on Civil Government and a century earlier than Rousseau’s The Social Contract.

Mingru xuean is a remarkable scholarly accomplishment in which Huang systematically introduced and commented on more than two hundred individual
Ming thinkers and scholars of seventeen different groups. This work also recorded Huang’s own philosophical ideas. Huang followed the great Ming Confucianist Wang Yangming (1472–1529) and rejected the dichotomous view of Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Huang argued that *li* (principles) is the *li* of *qi* (material force/actual beings) and *xing* (innate human nature) is the *xing* of *xin* (human mind), so *li* and *xing* cannot exist independently but are contained in *qi* and *xin* respectively. The significance of Huang’s argument is that there were no other places to search for the innate human goodness except in one’s own mind and heart, which should be the focus of Confucian moral cultivation. The combination of Huang’s place in time, the quality of his historical scholarship, and his sharp criticism of monarchical tyranny with the introduction of democratic conviction make him an important predecessor to Enlightenment thinking in China.

Yamin Xu

Further Reading


Huang Zongxi, the famous Qing dynasty scholar and author. Huang roundly criticized tyrannical monarchies in favor of democratic principles long before his Western counterparts.