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Ellis Sandoz and Chinese Quest for Liberty

Promise Hsu

While sending my first email to Prof. Ellis Sandoz on February 19, 2006, I did not expect at all that someday, or rather, eighteen years later in Philadelphia I would have the privilege of joining a roundtable in tribute to him by speaking about his extraordinary role in my project on the history of freedom. For me, it is a serendipitous encounter since in his response to my first email to him, Prof. Sandoz invited me to join the annual Eric Voegelin Society meeting that year, which was held in none other than Philly. In that email I sent to him from Beijing, the major question I posed for his guidance was this: why was individual liberty under the rule of law first institutionalized in the West and how could it be established in China? For me, this question is still, if not even more, important today given the re-centralization of power over political, economic, and cultural life in China over the recent decade. Before writing to Prof. Sandoz, I had already heard back from many scholars from across the world to whom I had reached out concerning this question since I had embarked on exploring the roots of liberty in 2004. That was one year before I left China's state television as an international affairs journalist and became an independent journalist and scholar. I incorporated some earlier major feedback I had received from these intellectuals in my first email to Prof. Sandoz and other scholars whom I later contacted. It turned out that while different experts including Prof. Sandoz himself helped broaden my horizons of the fountains of freedom with their variety of perspectives, few were like the American political philosopher who went far beyond writing me back once, twice, or a few times.

Between 2006 and 2023 when he passed away, Prof. Sandoz went the extra, extra, extra mile for my liberty project. He sent me the relevant books and articles. He invited me to join the conferences of the Eric Voegelin Society that he created and give talks at the Eric

This essay is a revised version of the text for my presentation at a roundtable, "In Defense of Civilization: Reflections on the Life and Work of Ellis Sandoz," on September 6, 10:00-11:30 a.m. at Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Convention Center 104A in the 40th International Meeting of The Eric Voegelin Society, 120th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. I am grateful to Dr. David Walsh for his kind invitation. I appreciate the varied perspectives of my fellow panelists, Dr. David N. Whitney, Dr. Glenn A. Moots, Dr. Martin Palouš, and Dr. Philip Damian de Mahy. I am also thankful to Dr. Walsh, Dr. James R. Stoner, Dr. Barry Cooper, Mr. Paul Caringella, Ms. Lisa Sandoz Robinson, Ms. Rachel Robinson, Dr. John von Heyking, Dr. Liu Muen, Mr. Yan Bohan, Dr. Lee Trepanier, and Dr. John Witte Jr. for their warm responses.

Voegelin Institute that he founded. He sought out a suitable publisher, St. Augustine's Press with its respected founder Bruce Fingerhut (1943–2023), for my little book that brings together what I learned about the history of liberty. And he wrote his foreword to it. His help even exceeded his own expectation, let alone mine. Through his introduction, I came to know Daniel Hsu (Xu Zhiyue, 1961–2014), an independent scholar and translator in Shanghai, who helped me to visit Shouwang, a non-state-run Christian church in Beijing in September 2006.¹ The church was a key Chinese community that I encountered in my liberty project. Its rise in the 2000s and 2010s alongside the growth of the larger Christian community in early twenty-first century China, as well as some ideas, thinkers, institutions, and phenomena in Western history such as metaxy, higher law, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), Eric Voegelin (1901–1985), Peter Drucker (1909–2005), Ellis Sandoz (1931–2023), Christianity, and church-state tensions and Magna Carta constitute the major parts of my book, *China's Quest for Liberty: A Personal History of Freedom* (St. Augustine's Press, 2019). This preliminary exploration laid the groundwork for my current dissertation and second book project, tentatively titled, *Reforming the Central Empire: Shen Yugui, Young John Allen, and the Christian Intellectual Community in Late Qing China*. The new project extends my interest in exploring the possibilities of China that is free of authoritarian and totalitarian rule by restoring the long-neglected significance of Chinese and Western Christian intellectuals in providing a higher-law and non-statist approach to modernizing China at the turn of the twentieth century.

Even during the current project that started in 2020 when I was preparing to apply to Emory University's History Ph.D. program, Prof. Sandoz's encouragement was indispensable, despite the fact that he was not able to write to me due to his paralysis since 2016.² His encouraging words came to me through his daughter, Erica, who often visited

¹ Daniel Hsu was a Chinese translator of several books by Ellis Sandoz and Eric Voegelin, including Sandoz's *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), and Voegelin's *Autobiographical Reflections* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), *In Search of Order* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

² It was with Prof. Sandoz's kind introduction that I visited Emory University for the first time in early 2012 after attending an international journalists' symposium at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida. At that time, I went to see Prof. John Witte Jr., a friend of Prof. Sandoz, without anticipating that nine years later I would begin my study under Prof. Tonio Andrade at Emory's Department of History. It was also interesting to know about Prof. Sandoz's 1967 visit to Emory with his advisor when Prof. Eric Voegelin delivered the Walter Turner Candler Lectures entitled, "The Drama of Humanity." For the details of Prof. Sandoz's visit, see Charles R. Embry and Barry Cooper, "Preface,"

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Prof. Sandoz at a nursing home in Pensacola. He told Erica that he was reading my book during his isolation because of coronavirus in 2020. Reading Erica's email, I could almost hear what she called her father's "feisty" voice on the phone.³ It reminded me of the word that Beverly Jarrett (1940–2017) uses to describe Prof. Sandoz in the publisher's note for the 2005 festschrift honoring the political philosopher—"intrepid."⁴

In addition to "feisty" and "intrepid," "warmhearted" is the word that I myself would like to use to characterize the professor. It was what I felt while reading his first reply to my emails, every time I heard from him or met him thereafter, and the last time that I visited him in this world. With my wife and daughter, I went to see Prof. Sandoz in Pensacola on August 7, 2022. Although appearing weak and speaking not very clearly, the ninety-one-year-old professor met us twice for more than two hours with Erica's help. Noticing that I put on a shirt after entering the nursing home for a while, Prof. Sandoz asked me if it was too cold because of the low air conditioning temperature. And he played with my three-year-old daughter by smiling at her and gesturing with his fingers. He enjoyed the music with us while Erica was playing *Moonlight Sonata*, *Danny Boy*, and *I Cannot Tell* at the nursing home's chapel. After surviving my first-year doctoral study that was way more stressful than my previous journalistic and scholarly career, meeting the scholar who was "feisty," "intrepid," and "warmhearted" even in his nineties greatly heartened my body and soul.

A little more than one year later, in the afternoon of September 19, 2023, Erica told me that her father was probably leaving us soon. A few hours later, she emailed me that he "went suddenly and peacefully" at about 6:34 in the evening.⁵ I had expected that the hour would come sooner or later. Yet when it did come, I realized that I lost contact with a lively and loving soul who was one of my most important mentors and friends and most supportive of my exploration of liberty along the way. That's despite the fact that I still had his email address, his phone number, and his daughter's contact information. As on November 2, 2014 when our mutual friend Daniel Hsu unexpectedly passed away in Shanghai, on September 19, 2023 the passing of Prof. Sandoz left me in a place where I was particularly aware of this world's cutoff from the next. Then I returned to my preparation for the

in *Philosophy, Literature, and Politics: Essays Honoring Ellis Sandoz*, eds. Charles R. Embry and Barry Cooper (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005), xi–xiv.

³ Erica Sandoz Cooper, personal email to me, August 5, 2020.

⁴ Beverly Jarrett, "Publisher's Note," in *Philosophy, Literature, and Politics*, vii–ix.

⁵ Erica Sandoz Cooper, personal email to me, September 19, 2023.

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comprehensive portfolio defense. Traveling to Baton Rouge on September 28, I knew that I was attending the professor's funeral services; however, I went as if I were going to see the American political philosopher as I had done before. I felt as though I would visit Prof. Sandoz again, even after bidding farewell to him the next day, first at University Baptist Church and then at Port Hudson National Cemetery.

Now almost a year from that trip and a few days after passing my dissertation prospectus defense, I finally have some time to meditate a little further on what Prof. Sandoz has done for my liberty project. My thoughts again go back to early 2006. What made me turn to Prof. Sandoz was that, back then at Beijing's National Library of China, I found a copy of a collection of essays he edited, *The Roots of Liberty: Magna Carta, Ancient Constitution, and the Anglo-American Tradition of Rule of Law* (University of Missouri Press, 1993). At that time, I was eager to know, among other things, why a kind of limited monarchy was possible in medieval England and some other parts of Europe while Chinese emperorship had much more power, if not absolute power. Before encountering Prof. Sandoz's edited volume, I had found the interpretation by Brian Tierney (1922–2019) quite illuminating in his *The Crisis of Church & State, 1050–1300: With Selected Documents* (Prentice-Hall, 1964). For the English medievalist, unlike other parts of the world, the Western political landscape in the Middle Ages was “marked by continuing tensions between religious and secular authorities and, in spite of innumerable vicissitudes and setbacks, by a persistent tendency toward the emergence of constitutional forms of government.”⁶ In *The Roots of Liberty*, Prof. Sandoz's study alongside that of other scholars like J. C. Holt (1922–2014), a leading English historian of Magna Carta, traces the specific origins of modern Anglo-American constitutionalism to the ancient constitution of Edward the Confessor (c. 1003–1066), the Great Charter of 1215, and the Lancastrian constitution presented by John Fortescue (c. 1385–c. 1479) that was revitalized by Edward Coke (1552–1634). It is what the professor calls Fortescue's “Christian synthesis of jurisprudence and philosophy” and the English jurist's emphasis on the authority of the Bible that most impressed me.⁷ With my preliminary reading of Sandoz's introduction, Holt's chapter on the medieval context of Magna Carta,

⁶ Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church & State, 1050–1300: With Selected Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 1.

⁷ Ellis Sandoz, “Editor's Introduction: Fortescue, Coke, and Anglo-American Constitutionalism,” *The Roots of Liberty: Magna Carta, Ancient Constitution, and the Anglo-American Tradition of Rule of Law*, ed. Sandoz (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 7.

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and the charter itself, I had a further sense that Christianity—Christian church and culture—was a critical factor in checking and balancing the secular authority in medieval England and the wider West and that no religion played such a powerful role in Chinese history.

Yet that does not mean that there has never been the potential for China to develop its own tensions between religion and secularity. Indeed, there is the possibility of a more viable and visible presence of this tension in the Chinese future. This includes the unexpected growth of the independent church in contemporary China that Prof. Sandoz unintentionally yet maybe providentially helped me to see in 2006. It also includes the long-obscured alternative vision of modern China that Chinese and Western Christian intellectuals put forward more than one hundred years ago and that my present project aims to illuminate.

I meant to make the most of this roundtable by combing through every major point that Prof. Sandoz drew my attention to during our correspondence. And while I have not been able to do this, I hope to finish it sometime in the future based on what I wrote about Ellis Sandoz and Eric Voegelin in my first book.

At present, I would like to end my preliminary reflection by quoting what Prof. Sandoz wrote in his first response to my email inquiry back in 2006. He shared with me his 2004 John Witherspoon Lecture, which later on became the first chapter of his 2006 book, *Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America*. His summary of why the United States has been “nearly immune politically to the ideological and eschatological maladies that have ravaged the modern world, such as fascism and Marxism and now Islamism” points to the “ever-present balanced living tension with the divine Ground” in America’s political culture. The tension is between one aspect of political life, which is “active devotion to public good, liberty, and justice,” and the other, which is the self-consciousness that citizens “were merely sojourners passing through this mysterious process of historical existence in the attitude of *homo viator*, since nothing better than hope through faith avails them.”⁸ After more than a century of modernization movements, which were characterized by the statist, secular,

⁸ Ellis Sandoz, *Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 49. On March 9, 2012, when I was writing a chapter of my first book on how to live in the two worlds simultaneously, Prof. Sandoz sent me this note that deals with the similar tension: “Don’t Neglect St. Augustine’s CITY OF GOD on the subject! Start w/ Bk 14 last chap. then Bk 15 etc. His theme is the 2 cities, earthly and divine, so close to your subject but a bit harsh. The tension is not easy to resolve. I’ve been working on related matter reading GALATIANS, esp. chap. 4:26-5:1. Very powerful. See also my discussion in REPUBLICANISM pp. 17ff. on Wesley and the Second Reformation so influential in America.” I mentioned this note in the epilogue of *China’s Quest for Liberty*, “The Reality of Politics: A Preliminary Reading of Eric Voegelin and Ellis Sandoz.”

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Communist, millenarian, and Sino-centric ideologies that brought no shortage of human-made catastrophes, some Chinese are becoming aware of the significance of the “ever-present balanced living tension” that Prof. Sandoz elucidates about American political culture. It might take at least another century for this kind of awareness to take root in the wider Chinese society. But better late than never. Individual liberty in the higher law framework might finally figure prominently in Chinese consciousness.