

# Regime Change with Chinese Characteristics

JAMES HANKINS NOVEMBER 16, 2018

REVIEW ESSAY

*Just Hierarchy:*

*Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World*

by **Daniel A. Bell and Wang Pei**

Princeton University Press, 2020, 288 pages

*Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*

by **Tongdong Bai**

Princeton University Press, 2020, 344 pages

*Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics:*

*China's Campaign for Hearts and Minds*

edited by **Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu**

Routledge, 2019, 318 pages

There is something a little unsettling about a nation that deliberately sets about increasing its “soft power.” Soft power, in the classic 1990 formulation by the Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye, is a nation’s ability to persuade other countries to follow its lead willingly, thanks to the appeal of its culture, political values, and foreign policies. This contrasts with “hard power,” the capacity to coerce other countries using superior wealth or military force. As the idea of soft power has developed in the last three

decades, it has come to include a country's ways of doing business, its digital environment, its wider patterns of international engagement, and its educational resources. As military force has become less effective as a solution to problems, and as the gap between rich and poor nations has closed, soft power has assumed ever greater importance in international relations. Countries that want to keep or acquire dominance among the world's nations have to make sure that they are the kind of places where global elites want to do business, to visit as tourists, and to live as skilled professionals. Their political systems need to pass moral smell tests of legitimacy, transparency, goodwill, and respect for human rights. Their institutions need to earn trust and build a reputation for consistency and reliability.

All admirable goals, to be sure. Still, deliberate attempts to acquire soft power are unsettling. In Nye's original formulation, some nations were persuasive internationally simply because of what they were. The United States, which dominated rankings like the "Soft Power 30" until recently, was widely admired for its liberal democratic values, its personal freedoms, its popular entertainment, its scientific innovations, and its thousands of private and public universities. These were not aspects of the United States that government officials had sought, consciously and systematically, to develop as weapons of international competition among nations. They expressed what we were as a nation. True, the CIA and other U.S. agencies tried to promote them for soft power advantage during the Cold War, but they didn't create them. Nowadays most of the top soft power nations in the world, including the United States, have policies designed to maximize their international appeal. Whole bureaucracies as well as university programs and private consulting firms specialize in the task. But the conscious marketing

of soft power to other countries cannot but arouse sales resistance, and sometimes buyer's remorse. Brand loyalty becomes harder to build.

Take the example of China's soft power initiatives in the last decade. China has implemented policies explicitly designed to increase its soft power at least since the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2011 formally declared its intention of making China a "socialist cultural superpower." Xi Jinping explicitly used the term when he announced in 2014 that "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world."<sup>1</sup> Since then it has been a full-court press. China has established hundreds of new universities, professional schools, and research institutes, dumped vast sums into the arts, filmmaking, international sporting activities, musical competitions, and tourism. It has increased the penetration of its political narratives via the global expansion of its media organizations such as China Central Television (CCTV). Its official budget for "public diplomacy" of this kind is at least fifteen times the amount spent by the U.S. State Department.

Yet it is hard to believe that this flood of cash is being well spent, at least from the point of view of acquiring soft power. The most recent surveys of international opinion show that China has hardly budged in soft power rankings over the last five years, hovering near the bottom of the top thirty nations, scoring far lower than countries like France, Sweden, Italy, and Canada that are greatly inferior in hard power. One problem might be the perception of inauthenticity. When the state finances international rock music competitions in central Asia, then flies the winners to Beijing to give concerts before high school students—attendance and enthusiastic screaming mandatory—it may be doubted whether China is yet ready to

challenge the United States or South Korea in the appeal of its pop music. Heavily censored “C-pop” simply can’t compete with K-pop, wildly popular across Asia and worldwide. China’s attempts to buy love for its pop music only illustrate the soft power weakness of an authoritarian state. You can’t put lipstick on a pig and expect it to win a beauty contest.

There can be little doubt that by far the biggest obstacle to Chinese success in soft power is the nature of its political system. Of the 12,500 people sampled across the globe for the “Soft Power 30,” the most data-rich analysis available, almost all put political values at or near the top in justifying their preferences. Political preferences thus weigh more than 40 percent in its ranking algorithm. And China, which stands high in a number of other categories, falls perennially at or near the bottom in perceptions of its political system. As Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu write in the introduction to their recent edited collection, *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*,

China appears no closer to solving the fundamental problem of how to cultivate an association with the kinds of political values that resonate positively beyond its borders and overcome the deep-seated suspicion of authoritarian states held by people in liberal democracies. Even in the developing world it remains uncertain whether China’s political values will be able to attract local partners in a way that transcends political expediency or economic self-interest and generates a common bond that runs deeper than platitudes about “win-win” cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years it has appeared to some observers that Chinese leaders have become less focused on the acquisition of soft power, favoring instead a

return to hard power, especially via global infrastructure investment through its “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). But if the hope behind this vast outlay of financial and industrial resources was to improve perceptions of the Chinese political system, the results have been disappointing. There are structural reasons why it is difficult to convert hard power to soft power: as the United States learned long ago in South and Central America, the use of economic hard power often alienates more than it ingratiates.<sup>3</sup> Even in China’s own neighborhood of East Asia, very few people have experienced a new eagerness to embrace China’s authoritarian development model, preferring those of the United States, Japan, or Singapore. Though countries on China’s periphery other than Japan remain cautious about joining U.S. efforts to contain China, Chinese attempts to push back against U.S. influence in the region have also found few willing allies.<sup>4</sup> Cultivation of its strategic partnership with the Russian Federation has only brought the United States to strengthen ties with India.

China’s inability to build trust via economic investment has been further undermined by its increasing use of what some analysts now call “sharp power,” defined as “attempts to coerce and manipulate opinion abroad, particularly in democratic societies.” A broader and better term might be “covert power,” clandestine means short of war that are used to weaken an opponent’s economy, social cohesion, and military effectiveness as well as to discredit its political system. Covert power is in effect a negative version of soft power. It can undermine an opponent’s soft power, but its success depends on its remaining covert. Once it is exposed, it has disastrous effects on the soft power of the nation that uses it, as China’s attempts to use sharp power in Australia have shown. The result is a global race to the bottom in soft power, ruining the prestige of one’s own country as well as the targeted

country and weakening the affective ties that enable international cooperation and reciprocity.<sup>5</sup>

In short, China's stupendous economic growth and military expansion of recent decades has left it a muscle-bound giant. It longs to exercise influence in the world commensurate with its power, but so far it has made little headway. Black swan events such as the Hong Kong riots of 2019 and the Covid-19 pandemic have on balance diminished its international prestige. The relative restraint shown, for a time, by the mainland in dealing with the riots, and the relative effectiveness of the Chinese government in suppressing the pandemic, it seems safe to say, have not greatly increased the world's admiration for the Chinese political system. It is hard to ignore that the deeper causes of the riots and the reasons for the initial spread of the coronavirus are directly linked with fundamental characteristics of China's political regime. It has become obvious to many observers inside and outside mainland China that the only way China will ever win respect abroad and exercise an influence matching its hard power is for its political system to change and liberalize.

The two books under review in this article discuss how China can reform itself, embrace modern liberal values, and grow its international prestige by returning to its ancient Confucian traditions. They both advocate what they call "progressive conservative" or "progressive traditionalist" reforms—expressions that in Western political thought would count as contradictions in terms.

## **From Legalism to Confucianism**

The fall of the Roman Republic in the first century BC and Rome's transition to autocracy under the Caesars is one of the archetypal narratives of Western civilization. Its lessons about the loss of freedom have hovered in the consciousness of the West since the Renaissance and have deeply marked the political thought of republican states into modern times. Since the time of Andrew Jackson, for example, there has hardly been a U.S. president who has not been denounced by political opponents as a new Caesar, eager to destroy liberty and republican self-government in his quest for personal power and glory.

The equivalent archetypal narrative in China is the story of how the warlords of the Qin state, after five centuries of division and civil war, united China in 221 BC under its first emperor, only to collapse fifteen years later. The Qin was replaced by the Han dynasty, which ruled a united China for over four hundred years. The standard explanation for the extraordinary success and dramatic collapse of the Qin was fixed already in the early Han by the statesman and poet Jia Yi. He wrote in a famous essay that the Qin had failed, despite all its wealth and military power, "because its ruler lacked humaneness and rightness; because preserving power differs fundamentally from seizing power."<sup>6</sup>

The first Qin emperor, Qin Shi Huang, is best known today for his astonishing mausoleum in Xi'an, rediscovered in 1974, containing a terracotta army of eight thousand warriors with weapons and chariots, whose purpose was to protect the emperor in the afterlife from evil spirits. The impression of ferocious militarism left by this monument is reinforced by the historian Sima Qian (c. 145–c. 86 BC), who tells us that the mausoleum required forced labor from seven hundred thousand workers to complete.

After it was built, thousands of craftsmen were intentionally buried alive in it, together with the childless concubines of the emperor, lest they reveal the presence of the treasures that had been entombed there.

The military success of the Qin, according to historians of the Han dynasty, could be explained by its embrace of a set of ruthless, utilitarian political ideas known today as Legalism. The term Legalism is misleading: it is not about the rule of law in the modern Western sense. As a school of political thought and practice it might better be labeled authoritarianism or political realism. It was born in a period of total war as a strategy for producing a “rich state and a powerful army.” This meant maximizing the coercive power of the state and subordinating all of economic, cultural, and intellectual life to that one aim.

In the view of Han Feizi, the leading theorist of Legalism—who has often been compared to Machiavelli—a major threat to the survival of the state was the ascendancy of Confucian thought in the “Warring States” period that preceded the Qin. Confucianism made the state weak. In part this was because, as a vision of political order, it granted too much independence of action to gentleman-officials whose only training was in classical Chinese literature. In part, Confucianism was bad for a state because it taught virtue and humaneness to its followers, and such values were of no use to Qin rulers and officials whose overriding goal was to make the peasantry productive and to train soldiers. “It is obvious that benevolence, righteousness, eloquence, and wisdom are not the means by which to maintain the state,” Han Feizi wrote. Most people are bad, and the only way to ensure their compliance with the state’s aims was through strict laws, impersonal institutions, and force. Dynastic administration should not be



based on mutual trust and respect but on adherence to rules, surveillance, and denunciation of offenders. The contrary was taught by Confucian scholars, whom Han Feizi described as “the vermin of the state.” The moral values they taught were “parasites” or “lice.” They needed therefore to be rooted out and destroyed. Their ways of thinking and the traditions they upheld had to be erased.<sup>7</sup> Qin officials agreed: they organized the burning of all but a few books and the censorship of new books. In 212 BC, it is recorded, 460 Confucian scholars were put to death—buried alive—as dangerous subversives. Strict thought control was a necessity of state.

After the Qin collapsed, the historians of the Han dynasty came to a judgment about its Legalist approach to government. Their judgment remained the dominant view throughout the long history of imperial China, down to the late nineteenth century. The Qin had given China unity and wiped out the feudal nobility who had contributed so much to the disorder of the previous centuries. They had established a centralized government and organized a hierarchy of bureaucratic offices of state, modeled on the organization of their army. They had made China strong and given it an identity. So much was for the good, and some Legalist practices, indeed, continued to be observed by the Han and later dynasties—the *Book of Han* even had a chapter devoted to “Biographies of Cruel Officials.” But the spectacular failure of the Qin after the death of the first emperor was the inevitable result of its hateful political philosophy. Stamping out China’s ancient traditions and persecuting its literati, in particular, made it impossible to win the hearts of the people. Conquest could be achieved by terror and coercion, but establishing peaceful governance for the long term required willing obedience from the people. Only righteous, wise, humane officials could sustain trust in a dynasty over centuries, and training in the

Confucian tradition was the best way to secure such officials. The rulers of the Han, like all subsequent Chinese dynasties down to the Qing, accordingly made Confucianism the governing philosophy of China.<sup>8</sup>

It was only in the late nineteenth century, when China was again being torn apart ideologically from within and humiliated by barbarians from the West, that the political thought of Legalism came once again to the fore as a governing philosophy. Its greatest champion in the twentieth century was Mao Zedong (1893–1976), revolutionary and founder of the People's Republic of China in 1949. It was no accident that Communist Party governance under Mao was the Chinese regime that approximated most closely the harsh government of the Legalists under the Qin. Mao had been attracted to Legalism since high school, when he had written an essay in praise of Shang Yang, the founder of the Legalist school and chancellor of the Qin. His admiration of Shang Yang only increased in the course of his life. He openly endorsed Legalism in his later years, during the “anti-Confucian” campaign of the Cultural Revolution, and praised its compatibility with Marxism. As late as the premiership of Deng Xiaoping, Legalism was endorsed as a source for Mao Zedong Thought and hailed as “a progressive intellectual current both in its outlook and its historical role.”<sup>9</sup>

The lessons of Chinese history, however, have not been lost on the present rulers of China. The struggles of China to extend its influence internationally have only highlighted the moral unattractiveness of the current Chinese regime and sowed doubts about its longevity. The legitimacy of the modern Communist Party, built since 1979 on the extraordinary performance of the Chinese economy, is now under threat as that economy falters. Will the Communist dynasty fail because of its

regression to an unloved Legalist order, or can the Party transition to a more stable and morally appealing form of governance, led by a new generation of Confucian scholars? Can the militant government founded by Mao be civilized by the better traditions of ancient China, as happened in the case of the Mongols in the thirteenth century and the Manchus in the seventeenth? Can a humane Confucianism once again save China from the brutality and brittleness of a Legalism *marxisé*?

## **Progressive Confucianism**

Thirty years ago the idea of a renewed Confucianism would have been, quite literally, unthinkable. Confucianism was then considered an heirloom of the past—a dusty treasure best displayed in the premodern wing of the national museum. Since then, however, “political Confucianism” has become a major school of modern Chinese political thought.<sup>10</sup> After initial suspicions, the CCP has gradually warmed to the Confucian approach to political reform. Confucian moral and political traditions were openly embraced and encouraged under Hu Jintao, who made Confucius the public face of China abroad by establishing the first Confucius Institutes. Confucius has been taught in Chinese public schools for almost two decades now, and his maxims have been constantly on the lips of CCP leaders. More recently, those applying for research grants in politics have discovered that support exists for themes related to Confucian theories of government, whereas funds have dried up for those interested in studying liberal democracy. One sign of official approval was the appointment of Daniel A. Bell—the leading English-language exponent of political Confucianism on the mainland—as dean of the School of Public Administration in Shandong University, a

major center in China for the study of political meritocracy in the Confucian tradition.

It would be a mistake, however, to read political Confucianism or advocacy of political meritocracy as simply another arm of China's soft power campaign. Interest in Confucian political theory goes well beyond the mainland, for one thing, and participants in the movement can be found in Hong Kong, Vietnam, South Korea, Singapore, and the United States. Popular Confucian movements have arisen in China and among overseas Chinese communities with little support from the CCP.<sup>11</sup> There is a wide range of opinion about the compatibility (or not) of Confucian political ideals with liberal democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and modern aspirations for global governance. There is a general belief among modern Confucians, expressed with increasing boldness, that the behavior of the Chinese government in the past under Mao and even in the present deserves sharp criticism and should change in a way that takes its bearings from the older moral traditions of China.

Two books published early this year, both by mainland Chinese scholars, reveal the reforming zeal animating the movement. The first is *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World*, by Daniel A. Bell and his wife Wang Pei, a professor of politics at Fudan University in Shanghai. The second, by Tongdong Bai, also of Fudan University, is entitled *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*. The two works are complementary in that both defend a Confucian political outlook at odds with Western ideals of popular sovereignty and political equality. Both urge liberalization and partial democratization of the Chinese regime in line with updated Confucian principles. Both see the rise of populism

and Trumpism in the West as sharpening the argument for Confucian meritocracy. But there are important differences between the two projects as well.

Bell and Wang's book is an academic trade book directed to a wide audience, written in crystalline, engaging English prose. It makes the most compelling case ever made in English for a Confucian reform of social and political values in China and perhaps elsewhere. It argues, against the presumptions of corrupt egalitarian culture in the West, that expressions of hierarchy—social, political, and international, as well as hierarchies among living species and between living creatures and machines—can be justified via normative appeals to natural laws. Hierarchies are a result of natural selection, a normal and efficient defense mechanism adopted by human communities. “It’s a pipe dream to imagine that a large-scale society . . . can be organized in a non-hierarchical, horizontal way.” The only hierarchy recognized by the kind of progressive thought currently dominant in the West, by contrast, is between those who accept “science” and those who reject it.

Bell and Wang do not quite reject the dogmatic scientism of Western elites, but maintain that it needs guidance from the moral traditions of ancient China. They argue that, since no society can ever exist without hierarchies, an important task of moral and political philosophers is to evaluate which hierarchies are just, such as those based on compassion and care for others, and reject unjust ones, such as those based on wealth. Bell and Wang are both social liberals, however, and want to see China embrace modern values such as female equality in the workplace, economic fairness, environmentalism, toleration of alternative lifestyles, and so forth. The

surprising part of their argument for Western progressives is the contention that “traditional hierarchies, properly reformed and updated for modern societies, can serve progressive political goals.” Unlike “woke” progressives in the West today who tend to believe that any valorization of the Western tradition represents an obstacle to the improvement of society, Bell and Wang maintain that affirmation of ancient Chinese traditions can support progressive political causes. Progressive values can have more purchase on the popular will when they spring from deep-rooted, prestigious cultural traditions and shared history.

Traditionally, Confucianism taught that harmony in society required the maintenance of the “five relationships,” and that realizing the moral nature of mankind, following the Dao, meant acting well in the roles dictated by those relationships: between friend and friend, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife, parent and child, ruler and ruled. Bell and Wang’s book provides an updated version of the five relations, showing how modern hierarchies can be justified through a generous interpretation of Confucian morality. They defend just hierarchies among intimates and members of a household, among citizens, among states, among animal species, and between human beings and machines. They engage critically with those in the West who use egalitarian premises to advocate the abolition of traditional households and to defend large-scale electoral democracy, global governance, equal rights for animals and children, and political systems that allow large private corporations to control powerful technologies. A China reformed along Confucian lines, a China that rejected its totalitarian/Legalist past, a China led by humane, well-educated, and public-spirited individuals with unencumbered power, would be able to reject all these Western pathologies.

Among conservatives in the West the most controversial part of this program is likely to be the proposal for a “vertical political hierarchy,” first advocated in Bell’s well-known 2015 book *The China Model*.<sup>12</sup> The proposal resolves the traditional tension or opposition between meritocracy and democracy by establishing democratic institutions only at the local, municipal level. At higher levels of government—provincial and national—rule is meritocratic. Entry to and political rank within the meritocratic hierarchy should be determined by performance on civil service examinations and a proven track record of effective and compassionate government in the interests of the whole community.

The sticky issue here for political Confucians has always been legitimacy. Bell and Wang argue that one-man, one-vote democratic elections, taken in the West to be the gold standard of legitimacy, are an inadequate basis for legitimacy in the case of a large, powerful state rooted in an ancient civilization. Even with universal suffrage, democratic voters do not, for instance, represent well the interests of past and future generations—for example, when the current electorate destroys the cultural heritage left to us by our ancestors or saddles future generations with unpayable debts. Democratic electors, focused on their own present interests, also have difficulty recognizing the moral claims of resident aliens and foreign peoples who may be affected by the decisions of their states. Not all democratic political values can apply to large states run meritocratically. Transparency, for example. Bell and Wang argue that secrecy in certain functions of government—particularly the selection of officials—is legitimate. A number of Confucian political theorists have recently argued that an autocratic command structure in a state—a decision-making process that ultimately rests on the will of a single person—is always in practice restrained by

informal “constitutional” limits on a ruler’s power, and rightly so. The Confucian tradition of imperial China is rich in debates about precisely this issue. Bell and Wang argue that practices can be adopted, or in some cases already exist, that limit the corrupt exercise of arbitrary power. A “first among equals” ethic of power at the highest levels, a system of recommendation that holds the patron responsible for the failures of his clients, the practice of regular consultation with the people via local democratic assemblies, and, above all, widespread education in Confucian values such as compassionate care for the people—all these means, taken together, can make an autocratic state humane and attract the love and loyalty of its citizens.

## **Against Political Equality**

Bell and Wang write in English for a wide audience interested in Chinese political thought, but they claim not to be proselytizers for global Confucianism. Confucianism for them is a civilizational wisdom containing some elements that may appeal to other countries in East Asia with Confucian traditions such as Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Vietnam. While they “do not entirely forsake the aspiration to universality,” they “do not expect [their] arguments . . . [to have] much persuasive power outside of China.”<sup>13</sup> Tongdong Bai’s new book, *Against Political Equality*, however, directed to an academic audience of political theorists, expresses no such hesitation concerning the transcultural applicability of his Confucian model of government. The “hybrid regime” he advocates, which resembles Bell’s mixture of local democracy with meritocracy at the higher levels, presents itself as a Weberian “ideal type.” Bai’s account of it is “not only theoretical but is also meant to be practical.” His model is intended as “universal,



applicable to any state” whose citizenry is largely ignorant of political questions and driven by self-interest, which is to say all modern democratic states.<sup>14</sup> For Bai, Confucian political ideals are a cure not only for the moral failures of the Communist totalitarian state, but also for the ills of liberal democracy.

Bai is a major proponent of political Confucianism and, like Bell and Wang, positions himself as a progressive traditionalist. He is perhaps somewhat less socially liberal (he has harsh things to say about American identity politics, for example) and more unbuttoned in his criticisms of the current Chinese regime. The book synthesizes work Bai has done on meritocracy for over a decade, work that aims to find a place for liberal democratic values within an overarching Confucian vision of society. He wants to see China embrace more protections for personal liberties, the rule of law (“the gem of liberal democracy”), a degree of cultural pluralism, and greater freedom and status for women. He has lived for long periods in the United States and this experience has made him a sharp and perceptive critic of the excesses of egalitarianism.

The project of the book is to demolish the Western principle of political equality, enshrined in “one man, one vote” electoral systems. For Bai, the reverence this principle inspires in the West is the main obstacle to accepting the sounder Confucian principle of rule by well-educated and moral elites. Bai argues that all societies have their own forms of equality, but that these are mutually incompatible. If political equality is basic to your system, you will inevitably have social and economic inequalities, and disparities of social and economic power will exercise undue influence on political outcomes that on the surface may look democratic. The Confucian alternative of social

and economic equality coupled with political meritocracy, “government of the people and for the people but not *by* the people,” would produce fairer and more enlightened outcomes. The tumultuous and morally debased public life of modern democratic societies would become orderly and stable.

Bai draws on Plato’s *Republic* to make the case that all societies have an honor-seeking element—a portion of the population driven by the desire for success and recognition. This element has to be accommodated somehow by the prudent political philosopher and made to benefit society as a whole. Neoliberal thinking in the West has failed on this score. Since American society is socially and politically egalitarian, people seek honor by making money and have contempt for politics. When wealth is the determinant of status, a society will become competitive and selfish. Huge disparities of rich and poor will appear. Politicians then become mere puppets of the rich. Bai’s ideal Confucian society will have relative economic equality, but will allow the honor-seeking element in society to seek rank and status in the political system. This status is accorded, however, on the strict condition that officials serve “all under Heaven.” Unlike Maoist ideology, which holds that the virtuous peasant should be the model for everyone, Bai’s updated Confucianism includes in the category of “all under heaven” many ways of life, not only peasants but also tradesmen, businessmen, professionals, service workers, and government officials.

A new frontier opened by both of the books reviewed here is the question of how Confucians should conceive of international relations. Both books criticize the Western-led liberal international order with its faux egalitarianism among nations, its culturally insensitive notions of justice, and its one-size-fits-all programs for human betterment. They see the swarm

of NGO activists, hectoring foreign leaders, and crusading journalists as just the latest instantiation of Western imperialism, this time attempting to colonize minds rather than territories. A more realistic assessment of the wealth and power of nations today would reckon that only a few nations are potential hegemonies over others. Some states are strong enough to be independent, while other states, poorer and weaker, will inevitably stand in some sort of clientage relationship to more powerful states. A global regime based on Western understandings of human rights is unrealistic now that the United States is no longer the “hyperpower” that it was thought to be in the 1990s. It is equally unrealistic to pretend that the rulers of states should not owe their primary obligations to their own people, or that informal hierarchies among states do not already exist. The key point is that international hierarchies will work best when they are regulated by moral principle and not by the lust for power, wealth, or ideological dominance.

Here too, our authors believe, the Confucian tradition provides useful models for state interactions. Bai updates the Confucian conception of *tianxia*, a model of international order where a Middle Kingdom acts as a source of power and civilized values and allies itself with sympathetic states at its periphery against *yi* or barbaric states. In the case of barbarous states, defined as those ruled by tyrants who harm their own people, the use of force can be justified. In the case of civilized states, only peaceful relations are legitimate. Good Confucian states will practice some form of reciprocity in their dealings with other states. This can be (in Bell and Wang’s formulation) “weak reciprocity,” built on mutually advantageous but temporary, unstable trade deals and low-trust alliances. (Both authors use the current policies of the Trump administration to illustrate this kind of reciprocity.) Or states can build relationships characterized by “strong

reciprocity” based on shared civilizational ideals, knowledge of each other’s culture, and pooling of economic and security interests. The “special relationship” between the United States and Britain is given as an example. Both kinds of relationship are licit, but strong reciprocity is vastly preferable to weak reciprocity. It is more stable and based on mutual trust, reinforced by interests and a shared civilization. A world where a few hegemonic powers take the lead over hierarchies of states bound together in strong reciprocity will much better manage global challenges such as climate change, both books argue, than a Westphalian system of 206 notionally equal states in open and unstructured competition with each other. It’s easier to get a few top dogs to agree than to herd cats.

## **Waiting for the Dawn**

Confucians are moral idealists but tend to be pragmatic when it comes to the arts of government. Before modern times the closest a Confucian scholar ever came to writing utopian literature was a mirror for princes written by the soldier, historian, and political theorist Huang Zongxi. The work was finished in 1663, some two decades after the Ming dynasty was destroyed by Manchu invaders from the north. After the final defeat of the Ming, Huang retired to his hometown in Zhejiang Province to take stock of the failures of imperial Chinese government—not just of the Ming but of all China’s dynasties going back to the Qin. His goal was to outline a “grand system of governance,” an ideal model for how Confucian principles might some day be restored, avoiding the mistakes of the past. His remaining hope was that he might one day be “visited by a prince in search of wisdom.” Huang had accepted that the barbarous Manchus would never be expelled, but Ming civilization neither could nor would be forgotten. The wheel of history

would someday raise China up again, and Confucian wisdom, enriched by historical experience, would once again be needed. “Dawn is just breaking and the light is still quite faint, but how could I, on this account, keep my opinions to myself?” Huang entitled his book *Waiting for the Dawn*.<sup>15</sup>

It is obvious to many today inside and outside of China that the world’s most populous country—and perhaps, someday soon, its richest—will not take its rightful place as a leading nation, exercising a power that is benign and welcomed by other nations, so long as it clings to its poisoned heritage of Maoist Legalism. Yet it doesn’t follow that the way forward for China is to adopt the Western forms of liberal democracy and human rights. Since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, many in the West have expected that China will join the rainbow of “color revolutions.” Those who believe history moves in a single direction towards an end may still believe a democratic revolution is inevitable. Such an outcome would stroke the egos of Americans and Europeans who believe in the superiority of our own Western values and political institutions; we want to believe a democratic revolution must come. But it is not inevitable. It is not, in my view, even likely. The reasons why lie deep in China’s history.

For one thing, liberty was never celebrated as a political value in traditional Chinese society as it has been in the West since Greco-Roman antiquity. Mostly, one suspects, this is because of the relative insignificance of slavery in Chinese civilization. The dynastic legislation of Chinese governments repeatedly abolished slavery, on Confucian grounds, from the Han dynasty forward. This did not prevent some kinds of small-scale, household slavery from cropping up at intervals in Chinese history, but chattel slavery never became the major social and economic institution it was in the West. Hence

the struggle for personal liberty has never gathered the kind of moral force behind it that eventually triumphed in Western slave societies during the early modern period.

What has been strong in the Confucian tradition since Chinese antiquity is commitment on the part of educated elites to care for the common people. The definition of the *junzi* or superior person—the goal of Confucian education—is precisely that he puts the interests of others before his own. Since the quasi-mythical times of the sage-rulers Yao and Shun, the standard of political legitimacy has always been the ruler's virtue, revealed by his justice and his care for the people. In the West since the seventeenth century the origins of government have been imagined as the striking of a contract among free and equal individuals. In China, the Confucian tradition has always taught that kingship and civilization came into existence together in primordial times, when wise monarchs brought order to chaos, created a ritual linkage between heaven and earth, and selflessly taught the people to flourish in peace and harmony.

China also has never had a deep tradition of what Aristotle called “political rule,” that is, power-sharing arrangements in small city-states. As the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci noted in the 1590s, China since time immemorial had followed a monarchical form of government and had never even heard of other constitutions such as aristocracy, democracy, or oligarchy. Before 1912, political power in China changed hands many times via dynastic coups, civil wars, and invasions, but never through sociopolitical revolutions led by intellectuals. The experience of such violent revolutions in twentieth-century China, despite CCP propaganda, has not endeared them in the memory of modern Chinese.

The imperative for China for 150 years has been to modernize, to catch up with the West in science, technology, military, and economic power. Its own survival required it to become modern, but now that goal has been reached. Now it faces the same choice Japan faced a century ago. The Japanese somehow negotiated a cultural compromise that allowed them to be both modern and Japanese. The Chinese too face the challenge of being modern but still Chinese. Unlike the Japanese, it is unlikely they will adopt something resembling Western liberal democracy; only defeat by the United States made that possible in Japan. China cannot and will not become a Western-style liberal democracy. It is too strong and too proud of its ancient civilization for that. But it may be possible for it to restore and update what it was for two thousand years, at least in historical imagination: a humane Confucian state. Many people today all over the world are waiting for the dawn, but in China there is increased confidence that the sun, when it rises, will rise in the east.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> David Shambaugh, “[China’s Soft Power Push](#),” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 4 (July/August 2015): 99–107.

<sup>2</sup> *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics: China’s Campaign for Hearts and Minds*, ed. Kingsley Edney, Stanley Rosen, and Ying Zhu (London: Routledge, 2020), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel C. Lynch, “The End of China’s Rise: Consequences for PRC,” *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, 45–62.

<sup>4</sup> Yun-han Chu, Mon-hua Huang, and Jie Lu, “How East Asians View a Rising China,” *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, 262–83.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley Rosen, “Ironies of Soft Power: the United States and China in the Age of Donald Trump and Xi Jinping,” *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Jia Yi, “The Faults of Qin,” in *Sources of Chinese Tradition from Earliest Times to 1600*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 228–31.

<sup>7</sup> Han Feizi, “The Five Vermin,” in *Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 97–118.

<sup>8</sup> In general see Dingxin Zhao, *The Confucian-Legalist State: A New Theory of Chinese History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), who argues that many Legalist principles were in fact enshrined in Chinese political practice, though its official state ideology remained Confucian.

<sup>10</sup> See James Hankins, “[Reforming Elites the Confucian Way](#),” *American Affairs* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 45–57.

<sup>11</sup> See James Hankins, “[Missionaries of Humanity: Popular Confucianism in China](#),” *American Affairs* 3, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 185–98.



<sup>12</sup> Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Daniel A. Bell and Wang Pei, *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 24, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Tongdong Bai, *Against Political Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 68, 96, 108.

<sup>15</sup> Huang Tsung-hsi (Zongxi), *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*, trans. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 89–90.

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