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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

China,
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ideologies,
Western Elite,
Confucianism,
Oriental Despotism

The book is essential not because of its intrinsic value. It provides not much new information on ancient or modern China. It is important for other reasons. It provides insight into the views of the Chinese elite. It could also well be an insight into the views of a visible segment of the Western elite, which seems to appreciate Chinese authoritarian practices despite publicly denying them.

Introduction

At the beginning of his book, Tongdong Bai notes with an air of irony that the interest in his manuscript, with ideas so different from what dominates in Western literature, and interest in China in general, is due not to the intrinsic value of his work and Chinese philosophical and political doctrines, but the pragmatic considerations. “If China had not been successful in the past few decades, few would bother to read anything related to China, this book included, even if it were intrinsically valuable.” (Bai, 2020: 3)

He implies that China’s rise provides him, as a spokesman for Chinese culture, an opportunity to elaborate on his view, which otherwise would be, he implies, discarded without further ado, and he would not have been able to publish his work by a prestigious academic press.

Tongdong Bai is right in his assessment that it was the power that made everything necessary, especially in the USA, where a peculiar Calvinistic-cum-Social-Darwinistic philosophy rules supreme, regardless of numerous fig leaves covering the official/public discourse to hide its nature. Still, the book is interesting not because of its intrinsic value and not even because of China’s rise but for other reasons. First, the author is a scholar who was raised in China and taught in China. Thus, his views are a reflection of the predominant intellectual trend endorsed by the Chinese elite. It is, in a way, the official ideology, sans the Marxist fig leaf, or at least one of the essential modifications of the ideology. Secondly, its importance is due to the fact that the book was published by the prestigious Princeton University Press and presumably underwent a rigorous peer review. Thus, the views of the author are not out of tune with the trends apparently increasingly popular among liberal American or possibly Western elite in general; it indicates that at least some of its members look for the “Chinese solution,” i.e., the transformation of Western capitalism in an openly authoritarian oligarchical rule.

Western Capitalist Democracy as Dysfunctional Institution

The book's central point is clear. The Western capitalist democracy, based on the principle of one man, one vote, does not work for various reasons. The positive alternative is Chinese Confucian autocracy, which ensures China's past, present and future glory. Elaborating on his central premise, which challenges the conventional Western view, the author notes with an air of irony:

“In order not to digress from the main issue, let us assume that these non-liberal thinkers are indeed unreasonable and even crazy.” (Bai, 2020: 168). Indeed, he notes that the Western public could not accept the alternative political model, and he states that the liberal model acquires almost a “sacred status” (Bai, 2020: 289), or “metaphysical status,” (Bai, 2020: 195) and is seen axiomatically as the best among all possible political systems.

This dogma must be discarded, and one should approach democracy with critical eyes. It should be approached critically, as is the case with any other political model. Tongdong Bai implied that he did not discard democracy and noted that democracy could indeed be the best possible system in the future. This is understood even by the present-day Chinese elite. Indeed, present-day Chinese leaders had not questioned democracy as such. They plainly believe that people are not ready for democracy now (Bai, 2020: 195). Tongdong Bai entirely agrees with this proposition and noted that the notion that people always make rational choices is naïve. “Voters are not even necessarily rational about their short-term material interests, let alone long-term ones” (Bai, 2020: 157).

While ignorant, impulsive and self-destructive, the masses could also be immoral, implying that the *hoi polloi* should not be left alone without appropriate guidance. Western liberal views on the sacredness of private life are clearly wrong. “As has been shown, to avoid this infringement, liberal-minded people advocate state neutrality on the issue of Good, considering it a matter of free choice of private citizens. To be clear, this value-neutrality only regards what is considered to be in the private sphere and about the Good” (Bai, 2020: 167).

Western democracies’ problem is not just that it is made up of ignorant, impulsive and immoral “basket of deplorables,” if one would remember Hillary Clinton’s definition,¹ Who could not make a sound decision concerning the country's present and future, but the flaws of democracy are much more severe. The present-day West is atomized and has produced a “plebeianized society of strangers” (Bai, 2020: xii).

In this stress on loneliness and atomization of the present-day West, the presence of individuals who see no meaning in their lives, Tongdong Bai followed the views, possibly without cognizing this, of the intellectual framework of European existentialists, who often interpreted personal freedom from either direct or indirect restraints of society in a tragic light. They often see humans as alone, facing ultimate death, without a real profoundly emotional connection with fellow human beings. Their socialization is purely external, and they indeed became an aggregation of “strangers,” self-centred obsessive individualists.²

While Durkheimian “organic solidarity” vanished,³ It revealed the social and spiritual vacuum, and it makes this society extremely vulnerable, for individuals, drenched in absolute cynicism, and

¹ Read Hillary Clinton’s ‘Basket of Deplorables’ remarks about Donald Trump supporters (2016) *Time*, 10 September.

² The body of literature on existentialism is enormous. Here are a few examples of recent works that outline the movement's significant trends: Wicks R (2020) *Introduction to Existentialism: from Kierkegaard to the Seventh Seal*. London: Bloomsbury Academic; Aho K (2020) *Existentialism: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity; Cox G (2020) *How to be an Existentialist*. London: Bloomsbury Academic; Stewart J (2020) *Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Existentialism*. London: Palgrave.

³ While existentialists emphasized modern human loneliness, disentanglement with others, and the essential artificiality of the *socium* in the modern West, Emile Durkheim, the seminal French sociologist, saw modern society differently. He

alienated from fellow human beings, would not sacrifice for the public good. The problem shall be fixed and not necessarily through a totalitarian solution. Elaborating on this notion, Tongdong Bai states that he hardly advocates totalitarian arrangements, in which the state monitors all aspects of the lives of private individuals and societies them, so to speak, in a sort of artificial way, through direct application of force. He noted that the fear of this compulsory collectivity was justified at the time of the Cold War when the USSR seemed to be poised for global predominance.

“As we have seen, a main reason for state neutrality is to prevent the government from stifling the plurality of private lives. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, a highly visible source of this intrusion was the kind of communist governments that imposed values on all aspects of a citizen’s life” (Bai, 2020: 168).

Still, the totalitarian model, in the author’s view, has gotten out of fashion and could not be seen as dangerous. The problem, however, is with the popularity of democracy and its emphasis on the power of the electorate and unrestrained individualism. “But this danger seems to have disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of attractiveness of communism in much of the world. Now the danger seems to come from liberal neutrality itself, for, in reality, radical individualism and a free-market economy have dominated many, if not most, contemporary liberal democratic societies. The former, in celebrating radical equality and individualism, may have destroyed all authorities except for, intentionally or probably unintentionally, the tyrannical power of the crude and unchecked narrow self-interest of each human being” (Bai, 2020: 168).

Furthermore, this democracy and unrestrained individualism could tear society apart or, at least, external threats could easily destroy this society. "This is worrisome. For example, suppose we are not too naïve. In that case, we know that sacrificing one's life for the common good is a sad and yet sometimes inevitable task for citizens from any regime. So if individualism means the primacy of one's self-interest, and this version of individualism is taken as the sole moral basis of a liberal democratic state with a large population, how can citizens of this state be persuaded to die for his or her country (the following argument can be applied to smaller sacrifices as well)? Why do they wish to join the military, risking their own or their loved ones' interests in order to protect the interests of millions of strangers?" (Bai, 2020: 168) It is clear Tongdong Bai implies that the present-day Western democracy has authorized the rule of atomized and selfish idiots. They could not live on their own and, implicitly, became the slaves of cunning demagogues, who have neither knowledge nor moral fibre and, as implied, are leading the West toward collapse. At the same time, Confucianism, deeply embedded in Chinese tradition, provides a universal solution. The most critical task of any society is the creation of a moral and competent elite, which could replace the society of "strangers," or mechanical, coercive collectivity with harmonious family-type arrangements. Here the elite, competent and moral, played the role of affectionate "father," the leader of "children" – his subjects.

Moreover, in order to create such an elite, one must follow the Confucian template. It implies that the elite selection should not be done by the hoi polloi but should be based on competence, knowledge and moral fibre. It also implies that their peers should choose members of the elite.

Creation of the Rulers

Discarding modern democracy does not mean that the elite should be concerned only with its own pleasurable living. It should exist for the well-being of the majority; the elite should be an attentive

elaborated on his vision in his book on the division of labour (Durkheim E (1997) *The Division of Labour*. New York: Lewis A. Coser). In Durkheim's view, members of the modern West are mutually dependent on each other and therefore forge strong bonds with each other. In the Durkheimian narrative, people internalize the needs of the entire society. They can well sacrifice their own interests and even their lives in the interests of society.

father who serves his family. According to Tongdong Bai, traditional Chinese philosophy implied that government should serve the people. “Mencius sounds awfully democratic: he embraced equality and argued that the government is for the people” (Bai, 2020: 43). At the same time, according to Confucians and Mencius, not “everyone is able to become a sage ruler” (Bai, 2020: 34). Chinese rulers have always understood this. Therefore, according to Tongdong Bai, regimes in China have a “meritocratic component” (Bai, 2020: 244). Only the most competent and moral people should rule. Usually, it implies rigorous training. At the same time, the acquisition of knowledge goes along with the development of morality.

Consequently, only “scholar-officials” could have a “stable moral fibre” (Bai, 2020: 36). While the author implies that the direct connection between knowledge and morality is essentially a Chinese design, this is not the case. The notion is rooted in the Western European tradition and could be traced to classical antiquity. It was also widespread during the Enlightenment, at least in the USA. It was the reason why the USA promoted public education, including liberal arts colleges. They were open, not for narrowly utilitarian reasons – to provide skills or trade for future work – but because of the assumption that educated people would be moral and engaged citizens.

Indeed, it was acknowledged by contemporary observers that education shall “integrate intellectuals with moral virtues and connect the value of civic responsibility to the classic academic mission of higher education” (Shulman, 2003).

The quoted author follows this line of thought. He also noted that abilities, knowledge, and high morals are not enough to be qualified to rule, and “the request of practical training may be crucial to the exam-takers” (Bai, 2020: 75). Needless to say, only those bureaucrats who demonstrate their good works are promoted (Bai, 2020: 57), and only “those holding public office (ministers) to perform the task of admonishing the ruler” (Bai, 2020: 266).

As a result of rigorous training and moral improvement, the ideal elite is emerging, which can deal with the masses in a competent and ethical manner. “The ‘elitist’ design of the Confucian hybrid regime is to give more power to the politically motivated, compassionate, and competent people, and check the influence of politics by those who are politically indifferent, narrow-minded and incompetent” (Bai, 2020: 95).

Elitism Does Not Preclude Social Mobility

Thus, only highly intelligent, moral people with sound practical experience and knowledge could rule, and “... selecting meritocrats has historical precedence in traditional China (Bai, 2020: 75). Still, the Chinese meritocratic system does not create a fixed and pretty much impenetrable caste of political Brahmins. It is open to anyone, regardless of his social position. From this perspective, Confucianism is different from similar ideological constructions prevailing in the West. Its difference from the seemingly structurally similar Socratic and Platonic doctrines should be clear. Socrates and Plato believed that “after the noble lie imposes a fixed and sharp line between those who can have further education and participate in political decision-making and those who cannot. In contrast, the Confucian line is not fixed, and the masses can always achieve high social status” (Bai, 2020: 48).

Not only is the Confucian elite open to any rank, but – and this also differentiates it from the Western elite – it has easy access to rulers, who implicitly appreciate honesty. “... In contrast to thinkers in medieval and even early modern Europe, the Chinese intellectual elite in the past had far better access to the upper echelons in politics” (Ibid.: 12).

Not only does Confucianism create competent and moral elite, but also ideal, obedient citizens. Confucian analysts stated, “It is a rare thing for someone who is filial to his parents and respectful to his older brothers to defy superiors” (Ibid.: 127).

Thus, Confucianism implied that the competent, moral elite should rule society. It shall achieve power, not via elections, but through rigorous training and experience, and Confucian elite rule shall lead to creating a society of mutual responsibilities and family-type care. Private interests shall be regulated and restrained in the name of the public good. Still, Tongdong Bai insists that the Confucianist order is not totalitarian, for it not only implies the existence of private interests but for other reasons. The very fact that the ruling elite is detached from ordinary folk does not mean that people cannot judge and, in a way, control the elite. Moreover, in some instances, the ordinary folk could, on occasion, participate in decision-making together with the ruling mandarins.

Control From Below

“Although, as we have seen, early Confucians have a broader reading of people’s interests, they are not detached from the ordinary, and, more importantly, they trust people for making judgments on whether their interests are served or not” (Bai, 2020: 167). Furthermore, in another place, the author once again emphasizes that it was the people who not only should be the ultimate judge of the elite's work but, implicitly, participate, at least in some cases, in decision-making. The author stated that "it is not enough that the regime endorses the appeal to the people; rather, people's interests have to be accessible to most of the people themselves, and their judgment is the ground of legitimacy to the regime, which is a key Confucian requirement" (Bai, 2020: 166).

Thus, Confucianism implies the creation of the state as a family in which both the "father" (government/elite) and the "children" (subjects) live under the conditions of mutual care and compassion – both in their relationship with each other and themselves. Family-type communitarianism is the prevailing model. It is a much better societal operational model than alienation, conflict or at least social indifference prevailing in the modern West. Indeed, one needs "to develop a bond in a society of strangers" (Bai, 2020: xiv), and traditional Chinese Confucianism provides these bonds. It brings "yin" and "yang" into society, preventing it from lapsing into various versions of Hobbesian "*Bellum omnium contra omnes*" (the war of all against all). Still, while restricting the potential destructiveness of modern Western individualism, Confucianism and, implicitly, Chinese political thought and practice do not advocate totalitarian submissiveness to an omnipotent ruler. As a matter of fact, Tongdong Bai implies that those who describe Chinese political tradition in the context of the totalitarian model are wrong. Here Tongdong Bai implicitly polemicalizes with Karl Wittfogel’s (1957) famous *Oriental Despotism*, which presented totalitarian regimes in the USSR and China as political derivatives from regimes prevailing in ancient and medieval China.

Confucian Model Is Not Totalitarian

Tongdong Bai noted that the Confucian continuum “denies a sheer separation between the private and public” (Bai, 2020: 171). Still, he implied, those who follow Karl Wittfogel, whose famous, scandalous book openly equated ancient China with totalitarian USSR and Red China, was absolutely wrong.

"In particular, we should not use contemporary criteria to criticize early Confucians for ignoring the possibility of totalitarianism. Indeed, totalitarianism, as we understand it, is a misnomer when describing traditional regimes. That is, there was oppression in traditional regimes, but the oppression was far from totalitarian" (Bai, 2020: 166).

Elaborating on this notion, Tongdong Bai noted that while totalitarian regimes ignore the autonomy of private life and their rulers did not care about their subjects' views, Confucianism implied a different paradigm. Indeed, Confucianism does not advocate the direct election of rulers. Still, in the context of Confucianism, the ruler and the elite should always be concerned with the people's happiness. Elaborating on this notion, Tongdong Bai noted, "With regard to traditional Chinese regimes, there is another reason that 'totalitarianism' can be misleading, because totalitarianism means a comprehensive and complete control of common people's lives, including both the material and the moral, imposing something alien to their interests on the people" (Bai, 2020: 166).

These totalitarian regimes could be different in the sense that rulers could use their absolute power to benefit themselves or, alternatively, they could think about some preconceived goals. Still, in both cases, totalitarian regimes are absolutely alien from the people and care less about their well-being. "What is imposed upon the people can be the private interest of a narrow group (mostly the ruling minority) – we can call these types of regimes 'selfish totalitarianism' – or a 'common good' that is separate from people's interests, which we can call 'idealistic totalitarianism'" (Bai, 2020: 166). The very fact that these totalitarians, especially the "idealistic" types, appeal to the interests of the people does not change the very nature of the regime. This appeal to the people is a sham, for the people in both types of totalitarian regimes are nothing but disposable materials in the hands of the totalitarian elite. If these totalitarians started to think about people, they would become not totalitarian but benign Confucian rulers. "Thus, to appeal to the interests of the people does not really challenge the legitimacy of these regimes internally, that is, within the paradigm on which these regimes are based, and to make this challenge means a paradigm shift. In contrast, in traditional China, thanks to the Confucian influence, the governments have to use the banner 'for the people to justify governmental actions, wars included'" (Bai, 2020: 166).

Tongdong Bai acknowledges that not all Chinese rulers followed the benign Confucian path and had moved along totalitarian lines. Still, these cases are rather the exception in the overall Chinese history. "Of course, the banner 'for the people may have been just that, a banner, and it does not mean that there were no oppressive regimes in Chinese history. Nevertheless, it still makes these regimes vulnerable to challenges internal to the political paradigm they allegedly adopt, such as whether the rulers have actually done a good job to serve the people's interests. If the above description is correct, then it may have been misleading to apply the term 'totalitarianism' (as it is understood in Western political philosophy and history) to regimes in Chinese history" (Bai, 2020: 166).

While rulers must be concerned with the material well-being of their subjects and family members, they must not follow their whims and be concerned with their moral upbringing. Not only must rulers be moral themselves, but they should also strive to engage in the moral uplifting of their "children."

"Although the Confucian idea 'for the people' sounds democratic, as already mentioned, the needs that the government should satisfy include basic relationships and moral needs, not merely material needs, while according to the mainstream understanding of democratic accountability, a government only needs to satisfy people's material needs. This emphasis on moral values can make the liberal-minded people in the contemporary world feel uneasy because they are worried that this emphasis will lead to the infringement of the public and the government on the private" (Bai, 2020: 167).

This is not the case. Confucian traditional government is not privy to each minute aspect of private life. In the same way as a father, he implies, does not observe and regulate every move of his children. The Confucian ruler does not, in most cases, regulate all aspects of the private life of his

subjects. Still, he does not allow "the children" to do something that is clearly wrong from a moral point of view. Furthermore, he implies that those who see the ancient Orient, particularly China, as a hotbed of totalitarianism, in Karl Wittfogelian fashion, are wrong.

Tongdong Bai stated that he does not want to juxtapose Western thoughts and political practices to Chinese tradition. Still, he implicitly does just this. In his view, it was actually the West that preaches true totalitarianism, and it was here that true totalitarianism was born. He admits that Chinese tradition also has similar trends. Still, he implies that it is relatively marginal in the overall palette of Chinese political thought.

West as the Birthplace of Totalitarianism

In the quoted author's view, it was ancient Greece where totalitarian ideas were born, and they are in sharp contrast with Confucianism, regardless of structural similarities and the presence of similar ideologies in Chinese tradition.

It was Sparta, a European, Western state, not China, which provided the template for the first totalitarian design. In Socrates' writings and Plato's *Republic*, private interests are abolished completely. The ruling elite (guardians) shall not have anything private. In *Republic*, "almost anything private is forbidden in two ruling classes (guardians and guardians' auxiliaries)" (Bai, 2020: 155).

"The city has to provide the guardians with sufficient, with no surplus and no lack, sustenance and other necessities of living. The guardians live and eat together, and this communal life is clearly intended to nourish the camaraderie among them" (Bai, 2020: 158).

Not just "guardians" (the elite), but even ordinary citizens are deprived of family, and their sexual life is managed by the state. Socrates "proposed that families be abolished altogether." He believed that "the young who are good in war or elsewhere" and "best women are allowed to reproduce" (Bai, 2020: 158). Thus, the *Republic* is a replica of Sparta and "has inspired various forms of utopianism and totalitarianism" (Bai, 2020: 158). In this totalitarian state, the rulers actually have no moral scruples and can do whatever they want. Socrates "states that a private man cannot lie to rulers, although it is appropriate for rulers to lie for the benefit of the city" (Bai, 2020: 155).

Western totalitarianism, in which the state completely absorbs the individual, is the other side of Western individualism. And, like Western totalitarianism, this extreme individualism is absolutely foreign to traditional China. Chinese rulers, the author implies, act or even fight to keep the public good in mind, and here they are clearly different from Western rulers who, since the time of antiquity, thought only about themselves. "A nice contrast is Alexander the Great, who is said to have conquered the world for the pursuit of glory (rather than for the interest of his people). He is often considered a hero in the West, and this is simply impossible in traditional China" (Bai, 2020: 166).

Ugly European Duckings of Chinese Thought

Tongdong Bai stated that he does not want to juxtapose Western and Eastern/Chinese thoughts and political traditions. Still, he actually implies the distinct difference between East and West. As he implied, one could find only one Chinese philosophical school which has a clear totalitarian streak. It was Legalism, with Han Fei Zi, as one of its most prominent representatives.

Legalism, in the author's view, is not the mainstream in Wittfogelian fashion but an unfortunate aberration. Moreover, while for Wittfogel, Legalism represents the very essence of Chinese political

tradition, it actually, in Tongdong Bai's view, emerged as a manifestation of Westernism, which demonstrates that even benign Confucianism could be subverted.

Han Fei Zi was "allegedly a former pupil of the influential Confucian Xan Zi, but then became a leading voice of the Legalist school, which was harshly critical of Confucianism" (Bai, 2020, p. 149). He was "a fierce critic of Confucians" (Bai, 2020: 122) and, like other legalists, believed that only fear and coercion could compel ordinary folk to follow the public good. From this perspective, Han Fei Zi's philosophy is quite similar to those who propagated Plato's *Republic* (Bai, 2020: 154).

While Legalistic views have evident similarities with those advocated by Plato and Socrates, their ideological construction is marginal, and it is Confucianism that dominated Chinese intellectual and political tradition. And it is absolutely different from that proposed by Socrates and Plato.

"Compared with the model in the Republic, which is focused almost exclusively on the conflict between the private and the public and thus advocates sheer oppression of (much of) the private, the early Confucian model appreciates the constructive aspect of the private to the public and thus may be less oppressive" (Bai, 2020: 170).

Since Confucianism, with its benign communalism, is intrinsic to Chinese life and thought, totalitarianist Maoism could only be the child of foreign, Western influence. Furthermore, here, Tongdong Bai implicitly polemizes with Wittfogel, who regarded Chinese "hydraulic" civilization as the birthplace of totalitarianism. Later, via the Mongols, they arrived in Russia and later spread everywhere. In the quoted author's view, everything was reversed: it was Western germs that polluted the pristine familistic and benign Confucian polity. China's recent excesses were, thus, explained as a Western plot to harm and exploit China. Thus, Mao's blunders and millions starved and killed could be blamed on Western Marxism-Leninism.

There were several problems with Maoism caused, as Tongdong Bai implies, by the corrosive influence of Marxism-Leninism – Western European and essentially an alien creed. The point here is that Maoism rejected the "three representatives" theory, incorporated into the Party since the time of Jiang Zemin's tenure and which implied that the Party could now embrace all people, regardless of their social position; even capitalists could be members of the Party. In any case, the Party could represent capitalists because they "represent China's advanced forces of production" (Zhao, 2009).

One might add that Stalin also advocated his version of the "three representatives" or "Confucianism", if you will. The late 1930s were an ideological watershed, in a way, and Stalin promulgated that the "exploitive" or "capitalist" classes were no more, and all strata or classes of the USSR had become "socialist." Therefore, the state represented all Soviets from now on. Consequently, all Soviet citizens received voting rights (Konstitutsia, 1936).

Thus, the "Confucian" theory of "true representatives" was not uniquely a Chinese construct but could be seen as a stage in the development of a revolutionary regime which, in the process of its maturity, increasingly dropped numerous ideological fig leaves from its body and returned, in a way, to the "eternal" political and ideological arrangements. In the process, "Confucian" or post-Mao China, structurally similar to other regimes (e.g., Stalinist Soviet Russia), emerged as a distinctly national force. Its goal became clearly not revolutionary sloganeering but the fulfilment of the national goal – improvement of the socio-economic conditions of its subjects and imperial aggrandizement. This *raison d'état* was implicitly present, at least in embryonic form, both in Lenin's USSR and Mao's China. Yet, the author does not see this. For him, Mao's and post-Mao China are basically two different species, despite the "Confucian" elements in Mao's policies. To follow "eternal" Confucianism, Mao would have indeed served "the people." Yet, this

"Confucianism" was foreign, in the author's view, to the Maoist model. He acknowledged that Mao supposedly promulgated that the regime should serve the interests of the people. "But there may have been a twist to this banner that is alien to the Chinese traditions. That is, here 'the people' is not inclusive but excludes the classes of 'capitalists,' 'landowners,' and so on" (Bai, 2020: 167).

Second, for Mao, the people's interests were an abstraction, and he actually regarded them as the material for his preconceived plans. The author notes that Mao supposedly thought about the interests of the people. "But there was an abstract, even mythical dimension to the people's interest or the 'common good' under Mao's communist regime, so much so that it could lead to the aforementioned strange phenomenon that the city was happy, but no person or very few in this regime were happy with their lives. Thus, on the normative issue of what makes a regime totalitarian" (Bai, 2020: 166-167). However, despite all of these problems – all of them due to imported Western creeds – Maoism had actually followed at least some aspects of the old Confucian tradition, the central tenets of Chinese culture, implicitly against Mao's will.

Elaborating on this, Tongdong Bai noted, "The communist regime under Mao is a tricky issue. There is no doubt that it was a totalitarian regime, but perhaps partly thanks to the Confucian heritage, even under this regime, 'to serve the people was still often considered the highest good" (Bai, 2020: 166-167). Thus, the continuity of Chinese tradition was not broken altogether.

Because of Confucian elements in Maoism, the transition to post-Maoism, natural for the Chinese social and political order, became smooth. The quoted author noted here, "After Mao, the Chinese regime has gradually gone back more and more to the Confucian understanding of the legitimacy of governance" (Bai, 2020: 167).

The return to Confucian traditionalism implied that rulers and those ruled lived in harmony, and he implies that this has been the case for a thousand years of Chinese history. The cases of revolts and violent collapses of dynasties are overlooked entirely here. Confucian China has always been stable, and this is the reason why the present-day regime is relatively stable and confident. "There may still be Maoist residue, and the regime still has totalitarian elements, but the difference between it and the oppressive regimes in the Arabic world (which are oppression by some minority groups over the majority of the people) is clear: the former has a clear dimension of taking the satisfaction of people's everyday needs as its goal and the foundation of its legitimacy, while the latter doesn't. The failure to appreciate this difference may have been why many Western observers mistakenly believe that following the downfall of some oppressive states in the Arab world. The present Chinese government must collapse soon" (Bai, 2020: 167).

Thus, Confucianism had been so much a part of Chinese culture that it could not be eradicated by imported Western Marxism-Leninism, implicitly a totalitarian philosophy, the product of the divisive and oppressive West. The end of Maoism was implicitly the end of Marxism-Leninism, socialist doctrine as an operational system. Consequently, the present-day regime is actually a Confucian regime, despite its Marxist fig leaf. Confucianism, a Chinese tradition/philosophy writ large, minus, of course, its Legalist perversion, made China a great, powerful and prosperous state in the past. The same could be said at present. China's success should be attributed to the country's old spiritual and socio-political roots.

China's Success Had Nothing to Do with Marxism or Maoism

Tongdong Bai implies that most Western observers mistakenly attribute China's present glory to essential Western doctrines. Some believe that Marxism-Leninism should be credited. Others, the majority, might credit Western market reforms. This approach is wrong. "But instead of proposing Chinese models that are based on the current Chinese regime and politics, I show a different kind

of Chinese model that may have contributed to the stellar performance of China, not so much of the past few decades, but in the past two thousand years or more" (Bai, 2020: 3). In the quoted author's view, the prosperity, stability and might of China have not been interrupted by numerous cases of societal collapse, foreign conquest, famine or similar disasters. He even ignores the official notion about the "century of humiliation" when the very existence of the country was at stake (Kaufman, 2010; Wang, 2020).

Nothing of the sort could happen if one trusted the author, under the guidance of Confucian bureaucracy, which ensures China's everlasting stability and internal peace. Consequently, Confucianism provides not just guidance for domestic policy but also foreign policy as well.

Confucian Foreign Policy

According to Tongdong Bai, foreign policy should be driven by moral considerations, or at least the moral aspects of foreign policy should be taken into account. Moreover, here, he also appealed to the Confucian template. While regarding Confucianism as the only true guiding light for foreign policy, Tongdong Bai does not see Confucianism as being in absolute contradiction to what the international community and, implicitly, the West regards as an appropriate operational model. Here, Confucianism is made adaptive to some Western principles in clear contrast to the applicability of the same Western models to internal policies. He noted that Confucian universalism in no way contradicts present-day international law and principles, and he agreed with the notion that human rights "override sovereignty" (Bai, 2020: xiv). Moreover, the very notion of Confucian designs for foreign policy is the same as those elaborated by people in Washington, and this implies that Confucian China and the USA could work together despite their cultural and civilizational differences. Thus, they could emerge, at least in the foreign policy realm, as "yin and yang," harmonizing global order.

Indeed, interestingly enough, Tongdong Bai finds that both ancient Confucian China and the present-day USA have a common denominator in dealing with foreign policy issues. Both are driven not so much by cynical *realpolitik* but by moral considerations. "Taking this perspective, we can defend the contemporary American and traditional Chinese regimes by arguing that among all the hegemonies in history, although state interests are a priority, traditional China and contemporary America do have a moral dimension that distinguishes them from the purely interests-driven hegemonies" (Bai, 2020: 196). This implied that "Confucian" and "non"/"anti" Confucian grand powers could coexist peacefully, at least until China would be strong enough to command absolute hegemony.

While Confucianist moralizing could be recorded in American foreign policy, it was only in China where this principle has been fully materialized, and this implied China's leadership. "Confucius made this kind of distinction among the hegemonies in his time. He gave conditional praise to Duke Huan of Qu, whereas he was far more critical of Duke Wen in Jin, although both dukes were considered hegemonies in those times. Although Duke Huan pursued his state's interests and personal gains, just as other hegemonies did during the Spring and Autumn period, he did try, to the extent that immediate harm would not come to these interests, to help the weaker states and restore and maintain the 'world' order, oftentimes through peaceful means, in contrast to a far more ruthless self-interested hegemon such as Duke Wen" (Bai, 2020: 196).

The moral implications of foreign policy are essential. "Failing to understand this and evaluating the moral dimension of a state's policies by asking if its citizens are driven by national interests, we will deny the morality of any state and embrace the relativist view that every state is equally immoral. A significant and realistic perspective, in contrast, is to look at whether a country takes

anything else other than national interests into account, especially when the sacrifice of national interests is not great" (Bai, 2020: 196).

Tongdong Bai acknowledges that the Confucian idea about peaceful and foreign policy has not been translated fully into China's actual behaviour. He acknowledges that quite a few Chinese rulers openly ignore Confucianism as foreign policy guidance. Still, the influence of Confucianism was so strong that even those dynasties which defied Confucianism were nevertheless more peaceful than European states.

Elaborating on the peaceful nature of Chinese dynasties, even those which did not embrace Confucianism, Tongdong Bai noted,

"Of course, the way China was unified at the end of the Warring States period was almost opposite to the Confucian ideal. Even among regimes in post-Qin China that allegedly followed the Confucian way, there were discrepancies between historical reality and the ideal types; as is always the case between the normative and the empirical" (Bai, 2020: 196).

Here, these rulers' foreign policy was similar to that of those emperors who followed, as already discussed, Legalism instead of Confucianism. Still, those Chinese rulers who forsook the moral Confucian underpinnings of foreign policy were not as successful as those who followed the strictly Confucian model. "But as I argued above, the important question is whether the traditional Chinese regimes, under the Confucian banner, did better than those states that completely lacked Confucian-style ideals. Arguably, the strongest Confucian elements can be found in the Han and Song dynasties" (Bai, 2020: 196). And in general, the influence of moral and essentially peaceful Confucianism was so strong that even those rulers who formally discarded Confucianism were more peaceful than Western rulers. Furthermore, overall, China was much more peaceful than the West; even Western scholars accepted this notion. The author noted that

"according to David Kang, between the late fourteenth century and the middle of the nineteenth century, there were only six major wars in East Asia that were allegedly under the Confucian influence, with the remaining four between Confucian states and nomadic and Western powers. He suggests that a strong China was good for the peace and stability of East Asia, while a weak one was not. Giovanni Arrighi's estimate of the number of wars during this period is higher than Kang's, but there were still fewer wars in East Asia than in Europe over the same period. Moreover, even the wars of expansion in Ming and Qing China were deeply defensive" (Bai, 2020: 197).

One might note here that Soviet ideology also emphasized the peaceful nature of Soviets, mainly ethnic Russians. And here, Soviet ideologists actively appealed to the centuries-old Slavophilism, which emphasized the essentially Christian peacefulness of Russian/Orthodox Slavs (Engelstein, 2009; Walieki, 1989).

There were other similarities. Soviet or actually Russian ideologists noted that the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire and the USSR treated minorities quite differently from Western powers: instead of exploiting the conquered people, Russians allocated scarce resources to them. The "older brother" gave the best of his possessions to the "younger brother." As a matter of fact, some Western observers asserted that concern for minorities, not for downtrodden toilers, was the very essence of the Bolshevik regime (Martin, 2002).

Tongdong Bai followed the same route. He noted that the Chinese state, "instead of exploiting resources from the newly gained territories, as was the case for European colonialists and later the

Japanese, the Chinese government actually used the resources from the ‘old’ territories to support the new ones” (Bai, 2020: 197).

Moral Underpinning and Internal and External *Realpolitik*

The moral underpinning of the Confucian order does not imply that all states should be treated in the same way. "Confucian order is hierarchical" (Bai, 2020: 194) and does not exclude the justification for “preventive” war. Indeed, people could be pleased by an invasion if it liberated them from tyranny (Bai, 2020: 225). The rulers, with all their moral underpinning, shall be pragmatic in internal policy as well. While Confucianism implied concern for everyone, even for animals, it does not mean that Confucianism implied that everyone should be treated in the same way. Confucians and Mencians believed that “the care should be graded and hierarchical” (Bai, 2020: 133).

Thus, Confucianism emerged as the universal model for both external and internal policies. Indeed, Confucianism is not just appropriate teaching for "ten thousand generations" of Chinese, but for all of humanity. As the author implied, the entire corpus of non-Chinese thought, despite some exciting findings, has been leading humanity astray, at least as political models to be followed. Therefore, the conclusion is clear: world salvation is in the cultural and socio-political Chinization, or at least humanity must accept China’s leadership and tutelage.

Confucian Idea and Proposed Political System is Universal

Tongdong Bai noted that some believed that Confucianism could be a workable doctrine only in East Asia (Bai, 2020: 244). This is a wrong assumption, for Chinese philosophy has “universal dimensions” and “continuing relevance” (Bai, 2020: 6). And in another part of the book, he reaffirms that “The Confucian model is meant to universally applicable and showing how it can handle some political issues in China is just an example” Bai, 2020: 207). Confucianism preached universal values of compassion to all human beings and even animals. And even some Western scholars became convinced that Confucian benign family resembles authoritarianism, albeit, the author implies, this Western term should not be applied to characteristic Confucian political arrangements, which are much better than Western democracy. Indeed, the author stated that democracy started to lose influence even in the West. Robert Kaplan saw problems with pure democracy. “The solution Kaplan offers is a hybrid regime that combines democratic elements with paternalistic elements, which, as we will see, is similar to the hybrid regime that a Mencian would support” (Bai, 2020: 165).

Unification of the Motherland

Thus, China’s traditional culture is universal, and Chinization is the inevitable outcome of China’s increasing influence due to its clear superiority of its socio-political and economic model, and even more, its moral superiority. Still, this process of global Chinization could not be accomplished unless full Chinization takes place at home. And here, two major problems must be solved. First, Chinese minorities must be fully assimilated.

The author of the quoted book believed the very existence of minorities is artificial. They were "constructed" due to the template of foreign, Western doctrine – Marxism-Leninism. Secondly, Taiwan should be returned to the motherland and also full assimilated. Chinization of minorities is an important task, and the author of the quoted book elaborated on this in detail.

The very fact that ethnic minorities are still present in China is due to the influence of Marxism-Leninism, an unworkable creed. Mao, following this Western template, “constructed” minorities and prevented their healthy and natural assimilation.

"Perhaps for Mao Zedong, being a nation-state was just a means or just an intermediate step, and these ethnic groups would be replaced by class distinctions, which would, in turn, be transcended by communism. In other words, the bond he would eventually adopt for China was the bond gained through classes. In Marx's theory, as Sun Xiangchen points out, nations and classes are all intermediaries, and the ultimate end is communism" (Bai, 2020: 208).

With an oblique reference to Uighurs and Tibetan problems, the author noted that problems with minorities' healthy assimilation are due to residual Maoism in the country's political philosophy and practice. This practice must come to an end, and everyone would then be Chinese.

"That is, this theory does not take the issue of national identity seriously. After the collapse of communism or Maoism in China, the current Chinese government still holds on to the nation-state model and the related policies introduced at the founding of the People's Republic, without Mao's ultimate solution to the ethical problems (to be clear, this solution is neither desirable nor possible). This is the root of ethnic conflicts and separatist movements in China" (Bai, 2020: 208).

While minorities must be Chincized, Taiwan must be fully incorporated into the motherland. Some people in Taiwan want independence. It was propagated by “some demagogues” and “the people of Taiwan falsely believe that independence is good for them. In reality, however, an independent Taiwan would become a pawn of Japan and the United States, and its people's interests would be sacrificed for the interests of Japan and the United States (Bai, 2020: 212).

Conclusion: Three Layers Assessment of Book

What was the ultimate meaning of the book, and why is it essential for Western, non-Chinese readers? The narrative should be seen in several contexts, and the comparisons with similar narratives prevailing in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia could be helpful.

To start with, the book presents Red China's elite self-image. It shows how the regime in Beijing wants to present itself to the global community: as benign, peaceful, and family-type collectivism or communitarianism, as the opposition not just to Western capitalist democracy, but also to totalitarianism, seen here as basically a Western import, foreign to Chinese tradition. Indeed, the author implies although totalitarianism and related brutality could be found in China, it is instead an aberration. Even Mao's regime was not really totalitarian, for it was tempered by benign Confucianism. Foreign policy is also projected as benign and peaceful in sharp contrast to the aggressive and exploitative policies of the West. The image is strongly anti-Wittfogelian, not only because of mass starvation – both in the distant and recent past – bloody revolts, Gulag-type methods in building the Great Wall, the Great Canal and similar phenomena are overlooked, but for other reasons. For Wittfogel (1963), the totalitarian tradition was born in the “hydraulic” civilization of the East and was later transmitted to Russia by Mongols. The tradition provides the framework for Soviet totalitarianism, which made the USSR so similar to Mao's China. In the author's view, the totalitarian menace originated in the West and from here, in the form of Marxist-Leninism, was transmitted to China, where it was transformed into benign communitarianism, family-type arrangements which could not, the author implied, be defined in the context of Western thought; the attempt to call them not just totalitarian but authoritarian is misleading. The proposed model is Huntingtonian in a way. It implies a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 2011).

Still, instead of fruitless confrontation, the model proposed peaceful surrender and incorporation into a benign Chinese-led global “family” in which all members would find peace, security and prosperity. The civilizational aspect of the proposal is clearly different from what one could find in the Soviet narrative. It is true that Soviet propagandists, mostly ethnic Russians and/or Russified minorities, elaborated on the old Slavophile doctrine about the benign nature of Russian/Eastern Slavic civilization and, implicitly, praised it as a viable alternative to the individualistic and brutish West. Still, this idea was not at the forefront, besides a possible short period of late Stalinism, with its distinct Russocentric imperial focus (Dobrenko, 2020).

The ideological and geopolitical confrontation with the West was not formulated as Russia against the West, not even as the USSR against the collective West, but as a confrontation between “socialism” and “capitalism.” It was “socialism”, which would replace “capitalism.” The Bolshevik Revolution was also not seen, at least in official discourse, as the launchpad for Russia's rise to global predominance, but as an event that opened the “new era” in world history, that is, the transition from capitalism to socialism. In the book's narrative, the story is different. The confrontation is between the “West” and “China,” not socialism, marginal and actually alien to China, vs capitalism. Confucianism, in its Chinese reading, confronts the West, Western civilization in general, as it had been formed at the dawn of history. In this narrative, China's 1949 Revolution is not the beginning of the rise of socialism, but the beginning of China's rise to global predominance or, to be more precise, the restoration of China's global position, which China had enjoyed in the past. The only difference from the past is that China's influence would now be global. Thus, the book presents not only the image or, to be precise, the propaganda image that present-day Chinese leaders project to their domestic and foreign audience but also the outline of the primary goal of China's global ambitions. This layer is clear and could be easily detected by most of those who read the book. Still, it is not the only layer.

The second layer of the narrative implied elaboration on the meaning of the socialist regime. While Western observers usually call the Chinese regime “state capitalism,” the leaders in Beijing call their regime “socialist,” and they could be right. Socialism, as Marx defined it, is a society in which the state controls the “command heights” of the economy, and this is indeed the case in Red China. Marxism also discards the role of capitalist democracy. In Marx's and his followers' view, it was a sham; it was capitalists who ran the show. Marx believed that the end of private property or “means of production” would lead to grass-roots democracy. Still, the opposite happened. State control over “means of production” led not to democracy but to the emergence of the powerful authoritarian/totalitarian state, and, as in present-day China, the state became structurally quite similar to that in ancient and medieval China. Thus, the leap to the future became, from a political and, in a way, ideological perspective, a leap into the distant past. In the Chinese version, it looked like a restoration of the old, “eternal” Confucian China. Marxism and “eternal” Confucianism do not contradict but actually reinforce each other. Moreover, the Marxist fig leaf, in some cases, could be entirely dropped without much damage to the regime's overall ideological construction. Actually, the rulers might even subtly encourage this ideological disrobing, which demonstrated the naked truth or, to be precise, the clear essence of official ideology: the major virtue of the Chinese is to be obedient to authorities and to strengthen the state. One could find similar arrangements during high Stalinism. The officials, or, to be precise, Stalin himself, openly glorified Ivan IV (the Terrible) and Peter the Great. Ivan, the Russian version of the Chinese First Emperor Qin (Qinshihuang), was not only sadistically brutal but also, if one followed the official Marxist-Leninist creed, should be condemned as a representative of the oppressive feudal elite. Still, in the

Stalinist narrative, he was glorified as a "progressive" ruler, plainly because his purges centralized the state; and worship of the state was the very gist of high Stalinism.⁴

Finally, there is the third layer, and it would most likely not be seen by the vast majority of Western readers. This layer is related to the fact of the book's publication by the prestigious Princeton University Press, presumably after rigorous peer review. The author of the book notes that his manuscript was published because of China's rise, albeit he does not elaborate on what this rise means. This, however, in our view, is not a sufficient explanation. The USSR was rising, an increasingly threatening colossus, and by Reagan's time, fear of the USSR had most likely reached its peak. Indeed, at that time, a film that imagined the USSR invading the USA was produced. For the Right, the USSR was a totalitarian monster whose socio-economic and political systems should have been sent to the dustbin of history. For some on the Left and some liberals, the USSR was a beacon for humanity, not, of course, because it was a totalitarian state but because it represented the highest form of democracy and, literally, libraries of books were published in the West to demonstrate this.⁵

One might also add that in the heyday of "Fukuyamism," the early post-Cold War era, when the notion of the "end of history," i.e., the assumption that American capitalist democracy would be the ultimate result of any historical processes, the fate of the manuscript would have been absolutely different. Not only would the manuscript not have survived a rigorous peer review of a prestigious academic press, but the manuscript would have been rejected in its proposal stage. Indeed, it would be naïve to assume that predominant Western discourse allowed a "hundred flowers to bloom" if one would remember Mao's famous expression. The Western "florists," including those in academia, are very selective and ideologically cautious about what "flowers" shall be planted in front of the major entrances to prestigious publishers and related good jobs. Those "flowers" which clearly depart or, even more so, contradict the mainstream are transformed from "flowers" into "weeds"; they must be, if not eradicated, at least sent to marginal lands, marginal soils of obscurity, where very few would note their existence. Thus, there is no doubt that a book that openly advocates an authoritarian or semi-totalitarian solution for Western society's ills would have zero chance of being published by a leading academic press in the heyday of "Fukuyamism" in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

So why did a book which openly advocated authoritarian rule and cancelling of elections get published now? One might note here that the publication of Tongdong Bai's book was not an accidental malfunction of invisible yet still strict censorship which governs American and, in a way, Western highbrow codified academic discourse. The same Princeton University Press recently published another monograph that openly challenged the idea of democracy (Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy: New Preface*, Princeton University Press, 2017). One could also note that Brennan's *Against Democracy* was a great success and was translated into several languages. This success would be unthinkable in the early 1990s. And 2021 still had another surprise – from the same Princeton University Press. It is a publication from Dennis C. Rasmussen, *Fears of a Setting Sun*. The book deals with the emergence of the American political system, the deed of the Founding Fathers who so recently were viewed by the vast majority almost as creators of a new sacred text – the American Constitution, which laid the foundation for American democracy, supposedly outlining "the end of history." Still, in Rasmussen's views, it was hardly a workable system or global example, and the Founding Fathers regarded the American constitutional/democratic experiment as an absolute failure. Once again, one could hardly imagine that Princeton University Press would

⁴ Stalin's appreciation of Ivan could well be seen in a film about the czar. It was directly sponsored by the state. Moreover, indeed, the comparison between Stalin and Ivan is diaphanous and could easily be seen throughout the movie. For an analysis of the movie, see Neuberger J (2019) This thing of darkness. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick was possibly the major representative of this trend. She also provided a general overview of "revisionism." For example, see Fitzpatrick S (2007) Revisionism in Soviet History.

have published such a work 30-35 years ago. Nevertheless, it was released afterwards, one can assume, after rigorous peer review.

So why did it happen? To understand this, one shall remember that the collapse of the USSR and confirmation of capitalist arrangements indicated to the Western elite that their socio-economic order would be eternal, and the "one-dimensional man," if one would remember the title of the famous book by Herbert Marcuse (1964) would always legitimize their rule by vote. And this would be called "democracy," and the old saying that "*vox populi, vox Dei*" (the voice of the people is the voice of God) is valid. Still, Trumpism, the events on 6 January and similar events in Europe – which commenced long before Trump's victory – indicated that "deplorable" could give the elite – both on the Left and Right -- short shrift, and this hardly pleased the Western elite. All these events indicated to its members that the populace rejected the old elite and was ready to commit violence, ready to smash the old economic and political order. And this horrified the elite's members, possibly on the level of the Jungian collective subconscious. Consequently, benign democracy was immediately transformed into ugly "populism", and increasing musing on how to limit the power of "deplorable," if one would remember Hillary Clinton's expression, became popular. And here, the Chinese model – and of course not only that – became handy. One, of course, should not oversimplify the picture. The predominant trend is still the old one: "democracy" is seen as mainstream, and "populism" is an aberration, the disease from which society must be cured. Still, underneath the assurance or, to be precise, self-assurance, the lingering fear of the "deplorable" continues to be strong, and the thought of what they could do in the case of sharp economic downturns is clearly present in the minds of the members of the economic and political elite and related intellectuals. In addition, the rise of global "deplorable," e.g., Islamists and their ability to deal with what seems to be an indestructible military machine of the West, as Afghanistan has shown, also concerns Western, primarily American, elite. And this defines their approach to the Chinese model.

It is true that they continued to blast the Chinese elite as a cancerous aberration and see the Chinese elite political model as peculiar political pornography – something obscene and ugly. Still, as political tension and fear of the elite grew, some of its members engaged in particular political voyeurism and, watching the Chinese political system, they became dazzled and excited, for it showed how the system in which "deplorable" have no say, could be built. And it was this trend that explains why the reviewed book, together, of course, with similar books, was published. Thus, the most interesting aspect of the book was not what it said about the trends in China, but what it informed the readers about the trends in the USA and possibly the West in general.

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