REDEFINING POLITICAL LEGITIMACY: THE NEO-CONFUCIAN STATE AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL MODERNITY

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Abstract

The conception of Neo-Confucianism did not emerge through the work of a single philosopher in a single lifetime, but rather through the evolution and assimilation of many philosophers and their ideologies over several centuries. Confucianism upholds and promotes respect for authority, societal peace, and hierarchical relationships. These components are essential for any government to build a stable one; without them, governments find it impossible to exist and grow. The critical assessment of a Neo-Confucian state within the framework and preconceived values of neoliberalism had been the mainstream methodology, resulting in a Eurocentric and Imperialistic understanding of Neo-Confucianism. Democracy, Human Rights, and the Free Market are pillars of the Neo-liberal state, not to be taken at face value, and certainly not to be indoctrinated as moral objective values. A bona fide critical assessment of the neo-Confucian state would be free from such flaws and evaluate the ideology within its own conceptual framework. This essay attempted to do so while pivoting around the central theme of collective good and unity within a Neo-Confucian state.

Keywords: Confucianism, state, Neo-liberal, ideology, Neo-Confucianism, philosophers

Introduction

As the world grows more interdependent and interconnected due to globalization, and as the phrase goes, it is now a global village (Aamir, 2023)., the question arises whether ideologies, narratives, and the relevance of discourse can be unified without sacrificing the differing voices. In Asboth work, this tactic was referred to as "Orientalism." Is it feasible and possible to shift "beyond Orientalism" away from dramatic fragmentation and toward global homogeneity?

> The emergence and eventual dominance of the modern, Western, secularized, and supposedly universal episteme (mode of knowledge) was only made possible in the context of Europe's projects of conquest and enslavement. (Wynter, 2003).

This study will use a framework that clarifies comparative political theory. Since each ideology has its own set of philosophical and normative concepts, it is crucial to

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embrace relativism, particularly in relation to non-Western political traditions, such as Neo-Confucianism. Consequently, it is incorrect to evaluate ideologies just through the liberal-democratic framework of the West. It is a truth that Euro-American ideas of governance have a significant influence on the global political discourse of the modern global village. Individualism, democracy, human rights, and free-market capitalism are the key ideas of this ideology. Thus, these concepts are used to evaluate all ideologies. When only Western principles are regarded as politically acceptable or morally objective, such a system runs the risk of epistemic imperialism Asboth, (2025) The power seekers suppress and compel the poor by all means, along with the forces, individuals, organizations, and states with clear and positive intentions (Aamir, 2023).

Thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer, 2008). Paul Ricoeur (Leonardo, 2003), and Fred Dallmayr (Dallmayr, 1993) explained this concept through the term "hermeneutics of difference". This idea describes an interpretive method that analyzes cultural, philosophical, and ideological borders without forcing one tradition on another. The term "hermeneutics" refers to the real study of interpretation, particularly as it relates to texts, language, and meaning. As a result, orientalism is not only a concept that counters and limits the dynamic nature of ideologies but also limits their tendency to understand the world. Epistemic imperialism tends to underestimate and misinterpret other cultures and ideologies, and over-emphasize and monopolize Western ideologies by treating them as the only resort for analytical and ideological tendencies. This concept also countered and challenged Western ideologies due to the paradoxical situation that neither allowed them to adapt to the changing world nor accept alternative forms of knowledge. Various accounts from non-Western philosophers are fascinating and rich in ethical, cultural, and political relativism; these concepts help explain the significance and empirical facts of their own societies. It is wholly epistemological imperialism to find a universalistic approach to several diverse and dissimilar civilizations. Each culture, history, and philosophy has its own significance, and variety offers unique variants. (Dallmayr, 1993)

Neo-Confucianism is a political and moral ideology that will be examined in this research within the framework of relativism due to its unique historical and philosophical context. Neo-Confucianism will not be examined as an ideology that challenges liberal standards. Rather, it is a system founded (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020) based on its own historical, cultural, moral, and political foundations.

Li represents a natural order, tranquility, and a moral cosmology in Confucian philosophy. These ideas offer a valuable framework for the development of a fair and just government and society. This paper will address and clarify the neo- Confucian worldview, which posits that rules, social order, and the concept of community well-being, rather than individual well-being, are the primary sources of sovereignty and legitimacy, rather than procedural equality (Roth, 2013).

This philosophy can also be examined through the lens of postcolonial critique, which provides a clear framework for assessing the enduring impact of colonial

power structures. In particular, neo-Confucian philosophy facilitates the examination of culturally ingrained notions of hierarchy, order, and moral leadership.

> *According to contemporary academics, achieving political autonomy does not necessarily entail eliminating the systems, ideologies, and inheritances of colonialism in formerly colonized states. The imperative to decolonize culture, knowledge, and social norms is intensifying as a result* (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). *This more comprehensive perspective on decolonization aims to rectify the unjust and prejudiced structures that were established and perpetuated by colonial powers. The aforementioned issues persist in other domains, including education, the economy, and social hierarchy* (Stein, & De Andreotti, 2016).

Neo-Confucian philosophy presents a worldview deeply rooted in cultural values, while also challenging the widely held belief that democracy, rights-based individualism, and the free market are universally legitimate or culturally neutral. This study aims to redefine the ideological rivalry between the United States and China as a struggle between Neo-Confucian moral collectivism and neoliberal methodological individualism, rejecting the binary framing of "authoritarian versus democratic" or "oppressive versus free." By doing this, it examines how different models of governance—such as China's state-led development and morally sound meritocracy—can be viewed as logical, culturally rooted systems of government rather than merely as authoritarian outliers.

This research adheres to a comparative political theory paradigm that incorporates postcolonial critique. As an alternate framework for political legitimacy and governance, we shall examine the Neo-Confucian state. By assessing China within the prevailing liberal-democratic framework, which emphasizes individual liberties, universal suffrage, and market freedom, this research situates Neo-Confucianism within its own historical and philosophical context. It critically examines how ideas such as Li, moral hierarchy, and communal unity lead to a particular kind of benign authoritarianism and state-led capitalism, drawing on both traditional Confucian literature and modern political activities. By doing so, the article examines the conceptual coherence of China's political model on its own terms and challenges the assumed universality of neoliberal standards.

Research questions

1. To assess and evaluate China's state model, grounded in Neo-Confucian values, as a culturally coherent philosophically

2. How does Neo-Confucian political thought contest the universality of liberal-democratic principles?

3. Can Neo-Confucian legitimacy, based on Li and collective morality, serve as a viable governance model for postcolonial states?

Confucianism

Quotes and conversations attributed to Confucius (Kongzi) and his followers, compiled after his death, primarily emphasize societal harmony, moral development, and responsible governance, making it the most authoritative work in Confucianism. Empathy, benevolence, and moral excellence are the highest Confucian virtues. (Confucius.) Li (礼), or ritual propriety**,** is central to Confucian ethics as it prescribes appropriate conduct in social and ceremonial contexts to maintain harmony and moral order. As Confucius states in the *Analects* (2:3), governing through virtue (*de*) and ritual (*li*) fosters internalized moral discipline, unlike rule by punishment, which merely deters behavior without cultivating a sense of shame. (Confucius) Xiao(孝), or filial piety, is foundational in Confucian thought, emphasizing deep respect and care for one's parents and ancestors as the basis for broader social harmony. In *Analects* 2:7, Confucius distinguishes true filial piety from mere physical support, stressing that reverence and sincerity are what elevate human relations above mere utility. (Confucius)

Confucianism is based on an ethical and political philosophy that emphasizes social order. Confucius placed a strong emphasis on a peaceful society based on moral accountability and well-defined relationships. Virtues like li (ritual propriety), xiao (filial piety), and ren (benevolence) uphold the fundamental relationships, which include ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, and friend and friend. These interactions are controlled by reciprocal duties. (Yao)

When morally honest people are in charge, social hierarchy is viewed as a natural and ethical system rather than as oppressive. Confucius believed that moral leadership and self-cultivation were essential to a well-ordered society. Therefore, virtue should take precedence over coercion in governance. (Yao)

As stated in the *Analects* (2:3):

> If you govern with laws and punishments, people will avoid wrongdoing but have no sense of shame. If you govern with virtue and ritual, they will develop a sense of shame and correct themselves. (Confucius)

Thus, Confucian thought advocates for a society governed not by force, but by ethical example and mutual respect within a structured hierarchy. According to Confucius, the main purpose of government is to uphold moral order. To guide people toward virtue (德, de) and ceremonial propriety (礼, li). He stressed that leaders should serve as moral exemplars, guiding their people not through fear of punishment but by the power of ethical conduct. From this standpoint, the personal integrity of leaders is vital for maintaining a just and orderly society. In *The Analects* (12:17), Confucius states:

> If the ruler is upright, all will go well even though he does not give orders; but if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders, they will not be obeyed. (Confucius)

Therefore, by encouraging suitable behavior among its residents, the government should preserve traditional rituals, promote self-cultivation, and maintain social peace. On the other hand, legalism or punitive systems were thought to be ineffectual in fostering moral growth over the long run.

Confucianism provides ethical principles that shape economic behavior and policy. It does not provide a formal economic framework. Confucian philosophy advocates for an economy grounded in morality, social harmony, and justice, where the well-being of the populace takes precedence over financial gain.

Economic activities must be in accordance with propriety (礼, li), righteousness (义, yi), and virtue (德, de). Profit (li) is not inherently bad; unethical profit-seeking is. (Yao)

> The superior man understands what is right; the inferior man understands what will sell. — Analects 4:16 (Confucius)

In Confucianism, the farmer is regarded as a moral contributor to society. Leaders are supposed to encourage agriculture. It is seen as the cornerstone of a stable and moral state. Luxury and extravagance in commerce are frequently condemned. As they have the potential to upset societal order. To ensure equitable taxation and distribution, rulers should prioritize the welfare of the populace. It is the role of government to discourage the enactment of laws that foster inequity or greed; governance should encourage thrift, stability, and modesty. Wealth accumulation is often viewed as a threat to social cohesion. Confucius promoted resource sharing as a way to promote communal well-being and lessen animosity.(Confucius.)(Yao)

Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) of the Han Dynasty formally embraced Confucianism as the state ideology. Scholars were appointed as officials to advise monarchs on self-discipline, ethical government, and the significance of virtue (de) and ritual (li). Civil service tests were conducted and were based on Confucian classics. Confucian values prioritized moral change over severe punishment. Instead of using force to rule, officials were supposed to lead by example. The severity of previous Qin regulations was moderated by Confucian principles, although Legalist aspects (such as strict laws and penalties) continued for pragmatic reasons.

The government believed that a morally upright populace would be self-regulating. It supported moral development and education as means of upholding order. Long-term economic stability, agricultural growth, and the construction of the Silk Road, which facilitated trade, were all features of the Han era. Confucian principles promoted societal stability. Agricultural productivity is enhanced due to honoring farming and modesty. Iron and salt monopolies were established by the state to regulate important

industries. Fostering social harmony lessened internal strife. Produced favorable circumstances for economic expansion. (Loewe, 2006 & Lewis, 2009) Despite the prevalence of theological plurality (Buddhism, Daoism), Confucianism continued to have an impact on Tang Dynasty morals and bureaucracy ethics. There was an expansion of the early civil service exams. Neo-Confucianism, which was spearheaded by academics like De Bary, 1999, emerged during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), which saw the resurgence and reform of Confucian philosophy. (De Bary)

The Neo-Confucianism

As Buddhism and Daoism had gained attraction in China by the Tang and early Song eras.

Confucianism was unable to provide answers to the cosmological questions, hence Cosmological concerns in Neo- Confucianism are profound philosophical queries concerning the nature of the cosmos, its genesis, order, and the place of people in it. A sophisticated philosophical and spiritual framework for explaining the cosmos, human nature, and morality was established by Neo-Confucianism by De Bary, (1999) specially. It remained grounded in Confucian principles while responding to the metaphysical profundity of Daoism and Buddhism. Classical Confucianism placed greater emphasis on morality and social harmony. The Song Dynasty's De Bary, (1130–1200) was the main figure responsible for the systematization and popularization of Neo-Confucianism. During the Ming Dynasty, Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Wang Yangming were among the other influential philosophers. (Angle)(Gardner, 1990).

It was a combination of the metaphysical ideas of Buddhism and Daoism with the moral philosophy of Confucianism. Through a more lucid and spiritualized interpretation of Confucian ethics, it was perceived as a means of reestablishing state stability, personal discipline, and social harmony.

Thinkers such as Wang, (2012). (1472–1529) and De Bary, (1130–1200) organized a state model that prioritized social harmony, moral leadership, and hierarchical order. Neo-Confucianism was organized by De Bary, into a thorough moral and political theory. From the Song to the Qing dynasties, his teachings served as the ideological cornerstone of the Chinese state. According to De Bary, dualism, qi (physical/psychic energy) and li (universal principles) rule the cosmos. The state must practice virtuous governance in order to conform to li, or the moral cosmic order. Li is present in human nature (xing), but it can be obscured by qi, necessitating rituals and instruction. The foundation of De Bary, system is li, or principle, and qi, or vital force. The universal moral system that governs everything, including statecraft, is Li (理). On the other hand, if li is unclean, Qi (气)—the material/psychic energy—can mask it. Laws, education, and rituals (li 礼) must all be in line with li. “Inner sageliness and outer kingliness” (neisheng waiwang 内圣外王) must be exhibited by the sovereign.

Civil tests that measure mastery of the Four Books De Bary, (1999) commentary has become the standard—are used to select officials. (De Bary, (1993). Each party has duties, even if their roles are not equal. A monarch must rule with justice, virtue, and compassion (Lai, 2013). Only a morally upright monarch is entitled to the devotion of a subject. A son must obey and show respect; a father must protect and educate.

A wife should be devoted and supportive, while a husband should be responsible and compassionate. Every young individual or citizen of a society should pay respect to every elder; in return, the elder should also treat them politely and with respect. A friend must adhere to the principle of trust when there is a question of friendship. This clearly shows that everyone has a moral obligation to do more than simply possess authority. Only when those in positions of power act honorably and morally does Confucian administration sustain hierarchy. Authority is not absolute; if a monarch loses their Mandate of Heaven because of a deterioration in virtue, they may be rightly removed. De Bary, (1993), Community Compacts (xiangyue 乡约), in Sources of Chinese Tradition) De Bary, not only considered education an essential instrument for guaranteeing an efficient government, but also as a means to develop one's own moral character. He brought back the academy system (shuyuan, 书院) and reformed it to produce future officials based on lixue (理学), or the "Study of Principle."

Although they functioned outside of the state structure, Shuyuan were semi-private organizations that frequently received government funding. The primary objective was to develop morally upright students who would grow up to be responsible bureaucrats.

De Bary, placed a strong emphasis on studying the Doctrine of the Mean, Mencius, Analects, and Great Learning. From the Yuan to the Qing dynasties, this curriculum served as the foundation for the civil service exams. (de Bary) Neo-Confucian ideology heavily criticized the Buddhist emphasis on disengagement from the outside world. De Bary considered it socially irresponsible. The basic Confucian ideal of moral social participation and obligation was compromised by disengagement from family, society, and government. De Bary, truly emphasized that genuine wisdom originates from engaging with society rather than avoiding it. To maintain peace, legalism advocated for stringent laws (fa, 兰) and severe penalties. Confucians disapproved of this, advocating for a more enduring basis for government through moral development and the transformational power of virtue (Pines, 2021). Neo-Confucian principles hold that fear-based rule fosters compliance lacking in loyalty and sincerity.

> If you govern with laws and punishments, people will avoid wrongdoing, but they will have no sense of shame. If you govern with virtue and ritual, they will correct themselves. — Analects 2:3 (de Bary)

Wang disagreed with De Bary, dualism and suggested: Zhixing heyi 知行合一, or "Unity of Knowledge and Action" Liangzhi 良知, or moral knowledge, is intrinsic and requires action.

The moral order of the universe is found in the mind rather than outside research. Wang contends that moral knowledge must be realized via action since it is intrinsic and ingrained in the human psyche. He explained that since the mind alone holds the cosmic moral order, there is no need to look for moral principles in the outside world. Moral intuitionism significantly replaced De Bary,s rationalism with this inward orientation.

> To know good is to do good. There is no knowledge without action." Wang Yangming (De Bary, & Lufrano, 2001).

Wang, (2012) a more decentralized moral vision of government emerged as a result of philosophy, which emphasized that everyone, not just scholars or elites, has intrinsic moral knowledge. Regardless of social position, Wang, said that everyone is born with a sense of morality. By implying that even commoners and peasants can develop moral character and support equitable rule, this concept fundamentally democratized Confucian political philosophy. "Every man a sage" suggests that virtue and wisdom are available to everyone, not only the most eminent academics. This contrasts with De Bary, elitist approach, which held that moral clarity could only be attained after years of study and research. Wang felt that moral example, as opposed to force or legislation, might control society by directly connecting self-cultivation to governance (De Bary, 1993).

Wang, stressed that instead of depending just on strict legal standards, officials should rule based on liangzhi (良知), or natural moral wisdom. He held that social concord and improved government are guided by moral intuition. For instance, Wang used both military force and appeals to the people's moral nature to put down uprisings, promoting self-cultivation and voluntary cooperation (Wang, 2012). Wang advocated that moral governance should come from lived experience rather than abstract dogma, arguing that "the Way is in the people's daily life" as an alternative to rigorously examining external ideas.In contrast to rigid regulations, he promoted an administrative strategy that was adaptable to local social settings and encouraged officials to govern with human empathy and responsiveness (De Bary, & Lufrano, 2001). Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume 1: From Earliest Times to 1600) Wang, thought that material and moral well-being of the people should be the focus of good administration. In order to reduce poverty and avert famine, he promoted land reform and the creation of benevolent granaries. These actions demonstrated his commitment to morally sound, caring leadership based on the Confucian concept of ren (benevolence). In an effort to foster virtue at the local level, Wang also underlined the value of local schools as places for fostering liangzhi, or innate moral understanding. By associating moral self-cultivation with education, he advanced a decentralized and compassionate kind of Confucian governance (Wang, 2012).

De Bary, orthodoxy had a significant impact on bureaucratic and educational culture of Ming Dynasty **(1368–1644)** at this time, as it was formalized in the civil service examination system. But reform-minded academics like Li Zhi (1527–1602), who opposed authoritarianism and advocated for individual moral judgment and intellectual independence, were influenced by Wang more intuitive philosophy. During the Joseon period in Koreathe strict hierarchical paradigm of De Bary, was embraced by the Korean government and incorporated into Confucian academies, family structures, and governance. His ideas, which placed a strong emphasis on social order, hierarchy, and loyalty, served as the ideological foundation for Korean Neo-Confucianism. In Japan's Tokugawa period (1603–1868) The samurai class, on the other hand, adopted Wang, ideas and defended their position as moral and combative leaders by highlighting "the unity of knowledge and action" (Lederman, 2022). Scholars such as Dai Zhen (1724–1777) opposed De Bary, abstract metaphysics of li (principle) during the Qing era, claiming that it ignored empirical observation and human emotions while promoting authoritarian moralism (Wang, 2012).

The Classification of Neo-Confucianism by De Bary, (12th century) established the agenda for an organized worldview that integrated cosmic order, social hierarchy, and ethical cultivation. In imperial China, his concept of li and gewu (examination of things) became state doctrine, and it was widely adopted in Korea and Vietnam as well. By the late Ming dynasty, Wang questioned De Bary, dualism between mind and principle, which emphasized external study, hierarchy, and moral clarity based on established scriptures. He proposed that moral knowledge is inherent in every person and that knowledge and conduct are inextricably linked. With an emphasis on adaptability, accountability, and grassroots change, this shift was toward internal moral intuition. Particularly in Japan, where samurai embraced his ideas to direct moral leadership, his ideology drew the attention of reformist intellectuals and military leaders. Li Zhi (1527–1602) expanded on Wang's concepts by opposing strict rule and promoting intellectual freedom. His rejection of De Bary, dogma represented a more general intellectual turn away from compliance and toward one's own conscience. Neo-Confucian metaphysics, particularly De Bary, abstract concept of li, was severely reexamined during the Qing dynasty by Dai Zhen (1724–1777), who argued that it disregarded human emotions and basic necessities. He anticipated contemporary Confucian reform by emphasizing empiricism, emotional intelligence, and practical ethics. Throughout East Asia, De Bary, paradigm was formalized in Joseon Korea as the foundational ideology of the state and society. Tokugawa. To portray the samurai class as moral role models, Japan adopted Wang's ideals. Neo-Confucian principles were selectively blended and reinterpreted in Vietnam and Qing China in response to criticism, reform, and governance. The tradition was consolidated by later Neo-Confucian intellectuals and critics who challenged strict hierarchy and internal morality by striking a balance between metaphysical ideas and real ethical experience. Prioritizing human emotion, education, and reform, adapting Confucian principles to regional political and cultural circumstances, Neo-Confucianism underwent a metamorphosis from a static dogma to a dynamic moral-political framework, impacting both imperial government and contemporary reformist

ideas (De Bary, & Lufrano, 2001). Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume 1: From Earliest Times to 1600)

Modern China – a Neo-Confucian State

Although Marxism is still formally the governing philosophy of modern China. There is no doubt that a discernible resurgence of Confucian and Neo-Confucian ideals has occurred in education, governance, and cultural policy. Especially in the late 20th century, particularly under Deng Xiaoping and succeeding administrations. This approach is a deliberate application of Confucianism to strengthen social harmony, national identity, and the legitimacy of the Communist Party rather than a formal doctrinal shift. This hybrid approach is sometimes referred to as "Confucianized Marxism" **or** "Authoritarian Confucianism."

In neo-Confucianism, the identity and functionality of a state are underpinned by the dimensions of politics, administration, and economy. Politics, however, is the primary driver of a state's conceptualization and functionality. Hence, in a Neo-Confucian state like China, the economy, administration, governance, law and order, and social order are all informed by political thought. Benign authoritarianism (Benign authoritarianism is a form of authoritarian politics in which the state maintains tight, centralized control. Frequently limiting democratic freedoms, but asserting that it is acting in the people's best interests by prioritizing social order, economic growth, and stability over political pluralism, is the prevalent political ideology in the Neo-Confucian state, which leads to a centralized form of government and a state-controlled capitalist economy, all rooted in the philosophy of Neo-Confucianism. The Neo-Confucian state has become a source of legitimacy in China by solving three main issues: 1) the issue of legitimacy by providing a solid value foundation for political power (Kim, 2019), The Primacy of Li (Principle) in the NeoConfucian Philosophy of De Bary, Significance for Contemporary Korean Society.) 2) the issue of behavioral norms and morality by establishing a system of values and daily routine for the people 3) the issue of belief and spirituality by stabilizing people's lives using the heaven and natural laws (Yibo, 2022, Construction of Legitimacy in Neo-Confucianism.)

Li, the underlying principle of the universe in Neo-Confucian thought, is the foundation of all politics, governance, and economics. *Li* represents the belief that everything in the universe is unified through a natural pattern or coherence Kim, (2019). The Primacy of Li (Principle) in the Neo-Confucian Philosophy of De Bary, Significance for Contemporary Korean Society). The unity provided to individuals through *Li* is not simply a connection with all other individuals and with the natural and spiritual world, but oneness with the universe itself. *Li*, in Neo-Confucianism, suggests that each of the arbitrary things in the universe, including humans, contains the essence of the entire universe (Littljohn). With a strong ontological basis, a Neo-Confucian state succeeds in not binding or integrating, but containing its population and other elements within a strong vessel, with the aim of achieving the welfare of the vessel, rather than its contents, because they are essentially one (Hoston, 2024).

The Politics – Benign Authoritarianism and Bureaucratic Centralism

A regime is "the set of basic formal and informal rules that determine who influences the choice of leaders and policies," and an authoritarian regime is one where power is acquired by a means besides free and fair elections (Stenner, 2005). The construction of the Neo-Confucian state followed a period of disorder, prompting thinkers to re-examine the question of who to obey within the Confucian political tradition. This question of why anyone should obey anyone is not exclusive to Confucian political thought; it is rather the fundamental question in all political theories (Wood). Renowned realism scholars such as Niccolò Machiavelli, Max Weber, Thomas Hobbes, and Thucydides primarily examined the forms of government that support powerful, frequently autocratic governments. Despite their differences, their views together advance our knowledge of centralized, authoritative power. Hobbes believed that in order to prevent chaos and ensure peace and security, people must submit to an absolute authority. This sovereign, whether a monarch or an assembly, would have unlimited power to enforce laws and maintain order. Hobbes considered this world to be anarchic because he believed that in the absence of absolute authority or without any political control, political order and law—what he called the "state of nature"—humans would act on their base instincts, leading to a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."(Malcolm, 2017) In the same way, through his groundbreaking work "History of the Peloponnesian War," Thucydides not only provides a thorough account of the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens, but he also elucidates the effectiveness and necessity of a strong and harsh sovereign for stability and defense. (Thucydides) Machiavelli also proposed that a ruler (prince) must act immorally when necessary to govern the state in a peaceful manner and preserve peace. Through force and decisive action, stability and authority are attained, which frequently justifies authoritarian methods (Mansfield). Sun Tzu is remembered primarily as a military strategist, although his book, "The Art of War," is also frequently linked to pragmatism and strategic leadership in political and military settings. Sun Zu was a well-known supporter of strong leadership, clever use of force, and the appropriate application of force, even though he was not entirely in favor of a totalitarian government (Twitchett, Franke, & Fairbank, 1978).

Authority represents the legitimate power given by the governed to the government, giving it the right to rule and be obeyed. A common misconception in understanding authoritarianism is that power is concentrated in the hands of the ruler, who is given legitimacy to act according to his own whim. The understanding of authority in Neo-Confucianism is far more complex than.

The ruler is obeyed within a broader context of objective moral values, which transcend the individual interests of the ruler and hold him accountable. Unlike Western empiricist traditions, Neo-Confucianism does not overlook the dimensions of metaphysics in political thought, forming a genuine and robust moral code that binds everyone, including the ruler.

Through a lens of individualism, egalitarianism, and freedom, it is not possible to understand, let alone assess, authoritarianism. Neo-Confucianism presents a political

framework that combines political, economic, and religious roles through a hierarchical structure between the cosmos, the official pantheon, and human society. The ruler takes up all these roles and is integrated into the hierarchy as an adherent to the moral laws of the cosmos. Neo-Confucianism utilizes the Confucian hierarchical social order and the ruler's contingent authority, as mandated by heaven, and integrates it into a rational, universal order. The ruler acts as an intermediary between heaven and man, and is held accountable for governance under a defined moral code.

Interpretations from classical texts, such as 'The Spring And Autumn Annals,' provided the link between moral principles and practical governance within the Neo-Confucian state. Hence, the ruler does not hold limitless power; his power is limited by the political framework (Wood).

The Neo-Confucian state derives its legitimacy from benevolent governance within a benign authoritarian government. The pre-requisites for this are: 1) there should be a hegemony of the Confucian culture, with only the Confucian community being

able to realize the way of the heaven 2) there should be a one-party system only as political parties that do not have Confucian beliefs cannot be eligible for power 3) universal suffrage cannot exist because all people are not equal. There is a spectrum of virtue within people, and only the most virtuous should have power to govern the lesser virtuous (Yibo, 2022, Construction of Legitimacy in Neo-Confucianism).

Though the legitimacy of the authoritarian government is established through Neo-Confucian principles, questions still arise about the construction of the government. Most pertinent of those questions is how a Confucian elite class can be created, taking into account both intellect and virtue. Skills, intellect, and intelligence can be fostered through education and identified through competitive exams. However, virtue is not identified in those exams, nor is it bound to have grown within a person through rigorous training. Thus, the inequality within the society is not adequately justified within the current manifestation of a Neo-Confucian state.

Nevertheless, what roots the legitimacy of the state is the sense of collective good that is ingrained in each member of the society. Neo-Confucianism employs objective truth and moral human nature to construct a form of integrated personhood in individuals, freeing them from individual desires and weaving them into a collective. The legitimacy of the Neo-Confucian state in China is illustrative in a long-term study conducted by Harvard University's Ash Centre. The study spanned from 2003 to 2016, with eight waves of surveys conducted from 32,000 individual respondents during this time period. The last survey conducted revealed that 95.5% of the respondents were either 'relatively satisfied' or 'highly satisfied' with the Chinese government. (Cunningham, Saich, & Turiel, 2020) In comparison, the Gallup survey reported that only 38% of respondents in 2016 were satisfied with the federal government in the US (Harsha). This contrast dispels the myth that an authoritarian government holds no legitimacy among its people, while democratization is the only universally legitimate form of government.

Neo-Confucianism's major premise and guiding principle is the centralization of authority; nevertheless, it is crucial that this authority be composed of morally upright and educated individuals, as the philosophy sought to establish a peaceful and stable society. Centralized authority allows for the implementation of morally sound policies. Neo-Confucianism supported and encouraged a centralized, well-planned bureaucracy. Neo-Confucianism's primary instrument is a well-functioning, centralized bureaucracy composed of a highly skilled and well-deserving bureaucracy staffed by scholar-officials selected through a rigorous civil service examination system. De Bary, explains Confucian ideologies as "In governing the people, nothing is more important than employing the right men. The right men are those who have cultivated their moral character and broadened their knowledge" (Aimin, 1983).

Modern China, which had drifted increasingly toward communist ideologies after achieving independence, is once again centered on Confucian thought. According to Polish sinologist Professor Bogdan Góralczyk, the PRC underwent a significant transformation between 1998 and 2002, during Jiang Zemin's tenure. China is currently seeking its place in the world, moving away from communist reforms (Hub, 2020). China has adopted a simplistic authoritarian style of government, which is based on and built upon the Confucian model of administration. China has a political meritocracy, unlike other nations that practice authoritarian governments. The selection system is based on the neo-Confucian thought that describes the sovereign as being assigned based on the capabilities of his virtues. "Wise and able" individuals are selected to protect and secure the country's vision for the future. Although the Western world criticizes China's political structure, it is perceived as more akin to totalitarianism. As the leading and ruling Communist Party is at the heart of all government sectors and controls every government department, military force, judiciary, and parliamentary meeting. The party operates under a pyramid system, with Xi Jinping at the apex and over 4 million grassroots branches at the base. The Communist Party of China's (CPC) ideological hierarchical structure guarantees that candidates selected for various executive positions uphold moral integrity.

A centralized bureaucracy headed by scholar-officials selected through a rigorous civil service examination procedure is strongly supported by Neo-Confucianism. Following the precepts of neo-Confucian philosophy, the three guiding principles of CPC ethics are selflessness, loyalty, and collectivism. According to Neo-Confucian ideas regarding legislative, executive, and judicial responsibilities, the emperor had ultimate authority; scholar-officials assisted in administration and the judiciary. The modern Chinese government often features a division of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial departments to maintain checks and balances, based on cultural and historical moral and political philosophy. The Chinese government is responsible for the legislative, executive, and judicial branches at all levels of government. Its presence at all levels is guaranteed by the Chinese People's Political Advisory Conference (CPPCC), a political advisory institution. The directives issued by the Central Committee must be strictly adhered to by all federal

and provincial authorities. To ensure a smooth transition to the implementation stage, cooperation among all relevant state departments is necessary. The People's Congress and the legislative branch assist the government in passing laws and managing plans, programs, and policies. The State Council is the principal organ of the administrative branch, supervising all aspects of local and federal governance (Ramay, & Babur, 2020).

The Economics – State Capitalism

The economics of a state are shaped through sheer political will and bureaucratic skills, underpinned by the state's philosophy. It has already been established how the principle of *Li* evokes a sense of unity from the entire state, steering it in the direction of collective welfare. China, as a neo-Confucian state, has established a unique economic system with a strong and robust public sector. This system, known as 'State Capitalism,' has completely transformed the Chinese economy, achieving new heights of economic growth and poverty reduction, earning the label of 'The Chinese Miracle' over the past couple of decades.

In a state-capitalist system, state-owned enterprises play a central role in the political economy. It integrates contemporary capitalist incentive systems, such as stock options, investment banks, and buyout funds, as well as global production networks, into the political economy. A stringent sectoral system is a characteristic of such an economy. Economic enterprises are divided into three tiers. The top tier comprises sectors that are strategic or inherently competitive. The firms in this tier are largely state-owned, with weak or almost nonexistent regulatory institutions, and are directly controlled by the central government, contributing approximately 75% of the country's GDP. Sectors including oil and petrochemicals, electricity, telecommunications, and military fall in this tier. This particularity significantly strengthens the state, as all these sectors hold utmost geostrategic importance. In China, the central government's increased attention and reinforcement of this sector have significantly enhanced the country's economic prowess. The middle tier comprises sectors that are neither natural monopolies nor pose any substantial strategic concerns. The firms in this tier face light regulation, produce efficiently at a moderate scale, and operate in integral sectors such as autos, machinery, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals. These firms are also exposed to global competition, which promotes technological dynamism. Middle-tier firms are owned by subnational levels of government, such as the provinces or municipal authorities. Despite state ownership, these firms are encouraged to compete with each other to accumulate specialized expertise and earn preferential support from the government. The bottom tier is where the state largely retreats, as it comprises medium and small enterprises that are consumer-oriented, light manufacturing, and export-oriented, mainly the agrarian sector. The bottom tier is primarily privately owned, with social regulation governing firms in the food and health sectors, and is subject to high levels of competition, resulting in extremely high productivity. It is interesting to note that until 2020, China had 99% food self-sufficiency, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. All three tiers are held accountable by the government for any breach of

regulations. The government exercises its control through ownership and key personnel decisions, rather than through traditional command economy planning, as it did in China in the past. However, this top-down manipulation and the mechanisms of employing control are often resisted by bottom-up entrepreneurial forces (Naughton, 2015).

The Neo-Confucian state of China does not have a planned economy or a disguised form of planned economy, but rather a form of capitalism. The economy operates within a market system, albeit not a completely free market one, at the mercy of demand and supply forces. The national government directly controls the personnel at all levels of local government, who, in turn, use tools to steer, invest in, and profit from the local economy. While marketization and the opening of finance have occurred in the economy, the state's control over the financial system and the imposition of regulations remain considerable. State-owned banks remain dominant in the banking system, with the emergence of policy banks intended to remove policy considerations from state banks, which are, in turn, state-run entities. The Shanghai stock market also remains dominated by state-owned firms, while other capital markets for start-up firms have also grown in the shadow of state ownership. The level of regulations imposed upon the private sector in China is not conceivable in the free market, as Friedrich von Hayek's idea of a perfect market was a "social activity without intervention by political authorities or conscious cooperation by the actors themselves."(Davies, 2016).

The regulatory agencies in China have seen substantial improvement since their creation, yet most face issues of weak and poorly defined mandates. Fragmentation and layering have contributed to the issue, along with a lack of top-level, powerful political patrons. The welfare system has also seen progress, particularly in extending healthcare to rural residents, although it remains more generous to urban residents, specifically employees in state-owned firms. This signifies the accentuation of differences between government-linked and independent sectors within the Chinese state capitalist system (Naughton, 2015).

State-led development and developmental state institutions as integral economic actors in Neo-Confucianism were put in place in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan during the years when their economies were undergoing their growth miracle, whereas in China, this system was not in place at the beginning of China's growth miracle, but found speed along with it. This leads to the strong association and reverse causality between state capitalism and China's rapid economic growth. In contrast to the state- capitalist model and its notable achievements, the neoliberal free market system in the USA appears to be in decline in terms of both sustainability and growth. The IMF, a financial institution that promotes the neoliberal economic agenda in developing countries, utilizes the Strategic Adjustment Program (SAP) to advocate for free markets, privatization, deregulation, indirect taxation, and free trade. The SAP focuses largely on accumulating foreign exchange reserves through these tools. The irony of the situation, though, is that the country that has been most successful at accumulating foreign exchange reserves, China, has a completely diverging and

alternative economic system in place. According to the statistics by the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE), China's foreign exchange reserves registered in December 2023 were USD 3238 billion(State Administration of Foreign Exchange). In comparison, the US, a flag-bearer of neoliberalism and the free market, had foreign exchange reserves amounting to USD 36 billion as of March 2024 (Mahida, 2024). This significant difference reflects the extent of success of the economic systems in place in both countries, also foreshadowing the emergence of a new superpower and a prevalent ideology in the world—Neo-Confucianism.

Conclusion

As the world witnesses the ideological war between China's neo-Confucianism and the US's neoliberalism, the tilt of the scale towards China is becoming increasingly visible. The US may have dominated global politics and the financial system as an undefeated, unrivalled superpower for the past century, but the cracks in its fortress are now bigger than ever. The increasing frequency of economic crises, longer recession periods in the economy, growing debt and corporate anarchy, moral degradation, a failing family system, and social unrest in the West all point to the failure of the neoliberal ideology. The unfolding of the apartheid and genocide in Palestine and Israel's support by the US has further opened the world's eyes to the reality of human rights and freedom promised by democracy and the free market. In a world beset by chaos, China's economic and political stability, rooted in its neo-Confucian ideology, offers a worthwhile alternative to the prevailing neoliberal ideology globally, particularly for developing countries. China is rapidly exhibiting and preaching its Confucian ideals to the rest of the world, a grave threat in the eyes of the US. The decline of the present world order and the rise of a new one are inevitable; the question is how many years more until the US will be unable to maintain its ideological domination intact.

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