

## CHINY: SFERY DUCHA, MYŚLI I REALIÓW GOSPODARCZO-STRATEGICZNYCH CHINY

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### **“THE WORLD SHARED BY ALL ALIKE” (天下为公) – CHINA: BETWEEN CONFUCIANISM, MARXISM AND DEMOCRACY**

The teachings of Confucius – as a tradition of social ethics – have exerted a profound (and continuing) influence on China (and East Asia) for more than 2000 years. This paper will look closer into this tradition by focusing less on the ethical and more on the political role of Confucianism. As will be shown, though, the two cannot be neatly divided but form an inseparable whole respective of personal and social ethics with political relevance. Thus, in the following, Confucianism will be discussed as a tradition of political thought, first regarding its major autochthonous concepts, such as “people-based thought”, “humane rule”, “harmony” or “the world shared by all alike”, second and third, in relationship to Marxism and democracy. In this final section, Michael Sandel’s book: *Democracy’s Discontent* will serve as a point of comparison for Chinese prerogatives in politics.

#### **Confucianism as a Tradition of Political Thought**

What was the pre-modern Confucian understanding of the state in China? And, as we in the West still scrutinize the ancient Greek and Roman scriptures for guidance in terms of political thought, what do the classical Chinese scriptures (“Five Classics”, “Four Books” of Confucianism) say about the social order – as “public philosophy”? And what are the repercussions of these scriptures – till today?

From numerous passages in the Confucian classics, it is apparent that the early Chinese kings distinguished themselves by ruling for the welfare of the people. Thus, we read in the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 书经):

“It was the lesson of our great ancestor: The people should be cherished, and not looked down upon. The people are the root of a country; if the root is firm, the country is at peace.”<sup>1</sup>

“Heaven and earth are the parent of all creatures. (...) And the great sovereign is the parent of the people.”<sup>2</sup>

“Heaven loves the people. (...) Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear.”<sup>3</sup>

And this was the crucial point: The ruler who gained his mandate, the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tian ming* 天命), was to govern the kingdom according to the will of the people.<sup>4</sup> This tradition of political thought has been called “People-based Thought” (*minben sixiang* 民本思想). It takes its origin in the cited quotes from the *Book of Documents* and from the writings of Mencius (*Mengzi* 孟子, 4<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC) who was to become the main early advocate of a people-based thought.

According to Mencius, the position of the people is the highest in the kingdom. Thus, he says:

“The people are the most important element in a nation; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is the lightest.”<sup>5</sup>

This passage has even a revolutionary significance (and hence it was banned now and then from the canonical scriptures by certain despotic rulers). And even other

<sup>1</sup> 皇祖有訓，民可近，不可下，民惟邦本，本固邦寧。 *Shujing*, “Song of the Five Sons”, *Xiashu*. Transl. J. Legge; *Chinese Classics* (with modifications): <http://ctext.org/shang-shu/songs-of-the-five-sons>.

<sup>2</sup> 惟天地萬物父母 [...] 元后作民父母。 *Shujing, Zhoushu*, “Great Declaration” I: Transl. J. Legge; <http://ctext.org/shang-shu/great-declaration-i>.

<sup>3</sup> 惟天惠民 [...] 天視自我民視，天聽自我民聽。 *Shujing, Zhoushu*, “Great Declaration” II: Transl. J. Legge; <http://ctext.org/shang-shu/great-declaration-ii>.

<sup>4</sup> In order to know the will of the people the emperor collected (among other measures) folk-songs among the people. As a good rule was seen to manifest itself in a harmony of heavenly/celestial and social order, all unusual and, in particular, harmful natural phenomena (such as earthquakes, eclipses of the sun etc.) were taken as proof of the emperor’s failure to govern adequately. The complex interactions between Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism (*fajia* 法家), particularly in the Han period, will be left out here for the sake of simplifying the thrust of the presentation. Especially regarding Legalism, it is often heard that premodern China was, politically speaking, Confucian only on the outside, marked by the “*Realpolitik*” thought of the Legalists, however, in the inside (*wai ru nei fa* 外儒內法).

<sup>5</sup> 民為貴，社稷次之，君為輕。 *Mencius*, 7B.14. Transl. J. Legge, *The Works of Mencius*: <http://ctext.org/mengzi/jin-xin-ii>.

passages relate more directly, the mandate of Heaven for governing the country through the will of the people could end: When asked about the end of the Shang Dynasty and the transition to Zhou, Mencius makes clear that it occurred because Shang had forsaken its mandate due to inhumane rule. The last king of the Shang was killed but, according to Mencius, rightly so, because the ruler did not act as a true king for his people: He was just a “fellow” who could be killed.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, Mencius is also known for having distinguished between two ways of government: between the “Way of the Hegemon” (*ba dao* 霸道) and the “Way of the King” (*wang dao* 王道):

“He who, using force, makes a pretence to humaneness/benevolence is a hegemon. (...) He who, using virtue, practises benevolence is the sovereign/king of the kingdom.”<sup>7</sup>

Hence, the “Way” of the hegemon stands for an inhuman, cruel government, whereas Mencius’ ideal is the “Kingly Way”, thus “humane rule” (*ren zheng* 仁政), for the welfare of the people.

It is often interjected that Confucianism as a school of political thought is limited because it puts one’s own family in the foreground of all interest. Although this might have been the social reality throughout history, the following passage by Mencius makes clear that the Confucian ethical claim reaches beyond the family:

“Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others shall be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the families of others shall be similarly treated – do this, and the kingdom may be made to go round in your palm.”<sup>8</sup>

Here we see that the virtue of “benevolence” or humanness (*ren* 仁) should be extended to all people and not just to the family. Hence, there certainly is also a universalistic claim to Confucian ethics.

A further idea of high political significance is “harmony” (*he* 和). Harmony had a special function as the Confucian social order was not based on equality but was marked by strong hierarchy. Inequality was accepted as natural because man is born into a situation of obvious inequality: Children learn to accept the authority of their parents, and in the Chinese context, parents keep this authority throughout life. As order in the state was viewed in analogy to order in a family, harmony was

<sup>6</sup> Mencius, 1B.8. From this context, the Chinese word for revolution arose: *geming* 革命 “change of mandate”.

<sup>7</sup> 以力假仁者霸 (...) 以德行仁者王. Mencius, 2A.3.

<sup>8</sup> 老吾老, 以及人之老; 幼吾幼, 以及人之幼. 天下可運於掌. Mencius, 1.A7.

the agent to smoothen the inequality in family and society; consensus and harmony offered social cohesion.

Harmony emerges as a central topic from the important short classic “Doctrine of the Mean” (*Zhongyong* 中庸) the title of which has become programmatic: The main goal of a gentleman was to pursue “the course of the Mean” or the harmonious middle way (*zhongyong zhi dao* 中庸之道) – also in government. Moreover, harmony is the main theme at the beginning of this important scripture:

“Equilibrium (i.e. maintaining the middle: *zhong* 中) is the great root from which grow all the human actions in the world, and Harmony (*he* 和) is the universal path which they all should pursue. Let the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish.”<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to note that the three main halls of the imperial palace in Beijing, those in which the emperor would conduct his business, all have “harmony” in their names, thus highlighting the importance of the notion of harmony for pre-modern China: “Hall of Supreme Harmony” (*Tai he dian* 太和殿), “Hall of Central Harmony” (*Zhong he dian* 中和殿) and “Hall of Preserving Harmony” (*Bao he dian* 保和殿).

Hence, it should not be surprising that the continuity of this concept is still of utmost importance in present day politics of China. There is a quote from Confucius which appears to be particularly popular these days: “Harmonious without homogeneity” (*he er bu tong* 和而不同)<sup>10</sup>. This saying refers to the quality which, according to the *Analects*, was said to be that of a true gentleman (*junzi* 君子): He is able to act harmoniously with others without compromising his principles. The saying (for which there is a multitude of varying translations such as, “harmony in differences”, “harmony and not uniformity”, “unity but diversity” etc.) is seen today even as a sign for China’s “soft power” approach to international politics and conflicts, similar to the related saying “to seek common ground while reserving differences” (*qiu tong cun yi* 求同存异).

Confucianism is a tradition that combines political thought with individual moral cultivation and education. This means in practice, that people who are in charge of public affairs should show – through self-cultivation – exemplary moral conduct and a sense of social responsibility (*nei sheng wai wang* 内生外王; literally:

<sup>9</sup> 中也者，天下之大本也，和也者，天下之達道也。致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。 *Zhongyong*, ch. 1. Transl. J. Legge: <http://ctext.org/liji/zhong-yong>.

<sup>10</sup> *Analects*, 13.23. See Qing Cao, Hailong Tian, Paul Chilton, *Discourse, Politics and Media in Contemporary China*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014, p. 184.

to be inwardly a sage, outwardly a king). This is, in brief, the political message of the short but important classic *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大学), i.e. that of a unity of politics and morality (*zhengjiao heyi* 政教合一). The goal in this tradition is not only to have virtuous rulers but that the cultivation of virtue by the governing elite should be an example to be followed by the common people. Hence, other than in the Western tradition where public or civic virtues – on behalf of the citizens – are often expounded, the Confucian tradition puts emphasis on the (personal) virtue of the rulers. Confucianism can thus be seen as a school of moral education, the purpose of which is to “encourage goodness”<sup>11</sup>, both in the rulers and, by way of giving an example, for the people.

In the history of Chinese political thought, there is a text which gained increasing importance, particularly on China’s road towards modernity. It is a chapter from the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 礼记), called “Evolution of Rites” (*Li yun* 礼运). It entails the vision of a proto-socialist society in the form of a “Grand Unity” (*da tong* 大同) which was supposed to have existed in antiquity when the great “Way” (*dao* 道) still prevailed on earth. It also underlines the Confucian preference of giving leadership or office to the most capable<sup>12</sup> – in contrast to the hereditary or dynastic transition of leadership throughout Chinese political history.

“When the Great ‘Way’ was practised, the world was shared by all alike (*tianxia wei gong* 天下为公). The worthy and the able were promoted to office and men practised good faith and lived in affection. Therefore, they did not regard as parents only their own parents, or as sons only their own sons. The aged found a fitting close to their lives, the robust their proper employment; the young were provided with an upbringing, and the widow and widower, the orphaned and the sick, with proper care. (...) Therefore all evil plotting was prevented and thieves and rebels did not arise, so that people could leave their outer gates unbolted. This was the age of Grand Unity (*da tong* 大同).”<sup>13</sup>

As the ancient Chinese thinkers were well aware that a “Great Unity” was a utopian vision and hard to be realized, the text continues like this:

<sup>11</sup> This appears similar to Aristotle as mentioned by Michael Sandel in one of his lectures on “The Good Citizen” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MuiazbyOSqQ>.

<sup>12</sup> This kind of transition of power to the most capable was said to have been practised also by the revered ancient sage rulers Yao 尧 and Shun 舜.

<sup>13</sup> 大道之行也，與三代之英，丘未之逮也，而有志焉。大道之行也，天下為公。選賢與能，講信修睦，故人不獨親其親，不獨子其子，使老有所終，壯有所用，幼有所長，矜寡孤獨廢疾者，皆有所養。 (...) 是故謀閉而不興，盜竊亂賊而不作，故外戶而不閉，是謂大同。 Transl. Burton Watson (with modifications); Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (eds), *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. I (From Earliest Times to 1600), New York: Columbia U Press, 1999, p. 343.

“Now the Great ‘Way’ has become hid and the world is the possession of private families (*tianxia wei jia* 天下为家). Each regards as parents only his own parents, as sons only his own sons; goods and labour are employed for selfish ends. Hereditary offices and titles are granted by ritual law while walls and moats must provide security. Ritual and rightness are used to regulate the relationship between ruler and subject, to ensure affection between father and son, peace between brothers and harmony between husband and wife, to set up social institutions, organize the farms and villages, honour the brave and wise, and bring merit to the individual. Therefore intrigue and plotting come about and men take up arms. (...) (The rulers) exposed error, made humanity their law and humility their practice, showing the people wherein they should constantly abide. (...) This is the period of Small Prosperity (*xiao kang* 小康).”<sup>14</sup>

The saying that the World has become “possession of private families” (in contrast to its being shared by all alike) refers to the hereditary or dynastic transition of power in Chinese history. These passages provided considerable inspiration throughout history, particularly for Chinese intellectuals of early modernity: The vision of a “Grand Unity” (*da tong* 大同) inspired the reformer Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927) to one of his most daring books, the *Book of Grand Unity* (*Da-tong shu* 大同书) with a vision of a “proto-socialist” society which can be seen as equivalent to “Communism”. Mao Zedong is known to have been an admirer of Kang Youwei’s ideas. In the same context, the idea of “The World Shared by All Alike” (天下为公) has become just as influential as a proto-socialist notion. Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866–1925), the founding father of the Chinese republic, found it particularly meaningful, and hence it is inscribed not only on his mausoleum in Nanjing but also – for overseas Chinese – on many archways such as the one leading into Boston’s China-town. Moreover, the goal of “small prosperity” or “moderate well-being” (*xiaokang* 小康, sometimes also translated as “small comfort”), as the stage that can be reached – in contrast to the rather utopian “Grand Unity” – became one of the catch-words in the political program of Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997). Hence, we see that the political goals of Chinese modernity were and still are formulated with explicit reference to classical Confucian scriptures.

Certain conclusions with regard to a Confucian State and politics can already be drawn from the above remarks. Unlike in the West, where in terms of social

<sup>14</sup> 今大道既隱，天下為家，各親其親，各子其子，貨力為己，大人世及以為禮。城郭溝池以為固，禮義以為紀；以正君臣，以篤父子，以睦兄弟，以和夫婦，以設制度，以立田里，以賢勇知，以功為己。故謀用是作，而兵由此起。禹、湯、文、武、成王、周公，由此其選也。(...) 著有過，刑仁講讓，示民有常。(...) 是謂小康。 *Ibid.*

thought we have the dominant view of a social contract through which autonomous individuals are able to handle their colliding rights and interests, in the Chinese tradition, society was considered to be an extension of the family; for both of which contention was believed to be detrimental, leading to break up and eventually chaos (*luan* 亂). With values that make sense in a family environment taking first place, such as responsibility, duty, loyalty, authority, status, mutual trust and reciprocity in human relationships, the Confucian scholar worked towards the goal of keeping the family-like community as harmoniously together as possible. In terms of politics, “humane government” (*ren zheng*) should be (according to Mencius<sup>15</sup>) a goal to strive for, and for the realization of benevolence a “scholar of right purpose” should even be willing to sacrifice his life<sup>16</sup>. His foremost political “virtue” in this endeavour, as a member of a “fiduciary community” (Tu Weiming 杜维明), was an extension of his humaneness or benevolence (*ren*), that is, a sense of social concern as was said of the great Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712–770), “to be concerned about country and people” (*you guo you min* 忧国忧民). Also, Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052), a famous scholar of the Song Dynasty, who is celebrated for his saying “To take responsibility for the well-being of the whole world” (*Yi tianxia wei ji ren* 以天下为己任), adds to the ethos of traditional Confucians in the well-known line: “To be the first to worry about the world’s worries and to be the last to enjoy the world’s joys”<sup>17</sup>.

In the course of history, these characteristics led to a ruling by a “meritocracy”, selected through government examinations, that inspired the French and German philosophers of the Enlightenment (contrasting to European rule by nobility and clergy) but which, with its hierarchical structures – seen from the standard of modern democracy – also had its grave drawbacks (apart from its own intrinsic problems of a rigid formalism which have been pointed out by critics from the early Qing Dynasty up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). Be that as it may, the goal of Confucian inspired government was a ruling by an educated elite through moral example and consensus – through the “Way of the Mean” (*zhongyong zhi dao*) – in order to reach a common good and a harmonious social order. This intellectual elite, because of its engagement in the administration of the country, did not develop an antagonistic attitude towards government, but rather assumed a paternalistic, care-taking function for the entire populace. Michel Aglietta and Guo Bai describe it in this way:

<sup>15</sup> Mencius, 3A.3.

<sup>16</sup> Analects, 15.8.

<sup>17</sup> 先天下之忧而忧, 后天下之乐而乐. Fan Zhongyan, “Inscription on the Yueyang-Tower” (*Yueyang-lou ji* 岳阳楼记), *Guwen guanzhi* 古文观止 (The Finest in Ancient Prose), Taipei 1981, p. 520.

“The legitimacy of the imperial Chinese regime did not come from the political representation of key political actors, but from the delivery of basic welfare for the population, especially farmers, who were the principal providers of fiscal revenue.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, we have in premodern China a rule by a moral elite, which saw itself as the representative of the common people; in this way, the question of political participation of the people itself never became an issue.

Finally, whereas in Western societies contractual social theories as well as the idea of antagonism between state (government) and individual (citizen) – evolving rather late around the period of Enlightenment and French Revolution – brought about the concepts of civil society and public sphere with the notion of citizens or intellectuals being critically and independently opposed to the state, the intellectual in the Confucian tradition was always supposed to serve within the government. At the same time he ought to be a loyal critic of moral misconduct, an attitude which certainly is still alive and well in China and other East Asian societies. Thus we have, in Thomas Metzger’s terms, a tendency toward a “top-down” (自上而下) civil society in China in contrast to the ideologically correct “bottom-up” (自下而上) version (which accords with the democratic ideal) in the West.<sup>19</sup> The question remains open, though, if these particular cultural resources of unity of morality and politics and a “top down” civil society still play a significant role for the further development of politics in China or East Asia.

For those who today wish to attach again more importance to Confucianism, the question arises, how it is compatible with modern politics. Previously, Confucians were committed to service in the state, in accordance with the dictum that moral cultivation is the prerequisite to service in the community (内圣外王 – i.e. in accord with public and personal virtues). Today, the opinions on this issue are divided. Tu Weiming, as one of the most important defenders of Confucianism, emphasizes in Confucianism above all (long neglected) spiritual traits and sees an ominous combination between Confucianism and politics in the Chinese past. Others, however, such as Jiang Qing (蒋庆) plead explicitly for a political Confucianism (see his book *Political Confucianism – The changing Direction, Particularities*

<sup>18</sup> Michel Aglietta a. Guo Bai: *China’s Development: Capitalism and Empire*, Routledge 2013, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> For the different concept of civil society in China see Philip C. C. Huang, ‘Public Sphere’/‘Civil Society’ in China? *The Third Realm Between State and Society*, in: “Modern China”, 19 (1993) 2, p. 216–240. For the distinction between “top-down” and “bottom-up” models, see Thomas Metzger, “The Western Concept of the Civil Society in the Context of Chinese History”, Hoover Essay: <http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/publications/he/21/a.html>.



and *Development of Contemporary Confucianism*, 2003)<sup>20</sup>. His view is supported, among others, by Daniel A. Bell (贝淡宁).<sup>21</sup>

As for the significance of Confucianism in China's current policy, the situation is not unambiguous. On the one hand, Confucianism is now celebrated as a great national heritage, and we can observe a worldwide cultural campaign with the establishment of Confucius Institutes. Also, there are political goals with explicit reference to Confucian ideas such as the achievement of a society of "Small Prosperity" (*xiaokang shehui* 小康社会) by 2021 (hundred years after the founding of the CCP) and a "harmonious society / world" (*hexie shehui / shijie* 和谐社会 / 世界) by 2049 (hundred years after the founding of the PRC). On the other hand, the question arises, whether this is a (conscious) instrumentalization of Confucianism, i.e. a politically motivated reconstruction of tradition, or if it is a (more or less unconscious) continuation of a tradition on the part of the CCP, that is, an internalization of Confucian notions of order by the leadership – but now under a different, namely Marxist, guise?

In Western assessments of China's political situation it is often overlooked that to the present day, the historical and cultural conditions have been lacking, which made the liberal-democratic model such a success story in our hemisphere. Conversely, this also means that essential elements of Confucian political and social understanding have been preserved in post-Confucian "Socialist" China. In summary, therefore, we can say that due to the history of Confucian political culture depicted above, China is still largely characterized by consensus, hierarchy/status and particular relationships, whereas our democracies, in contrast, function on the basis of contention (*viz.* election campaigns, labor disputes etc.), equality and universalistic convictions.

Of course, such basic cultural patterns cannot be fixed in an ahistorical or essentialist manner. Also in China, there is much in flux. At the moment we see that China – within decades – has reached a stage of development for which the countries of Europe have taken centuries – not to mention the disastrous detours of colonialism, imperialism or even fascism. Thus, also China has not remained fixed to a static Confucian model, much rather an amazing cross-cultural fusion of Western and Chinese thought has taken place during the last 150 years. This means that the Chinese value system has passed through the encounter with the West and has

<sup>20</sup> 政治儒家 – 当代儒家的专向, 特质与发展.

<sup>21</sup> See the appendix 2 ("Jiang Qing's Political Confucianism") in Bell's book, *China's New Confucianism. Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society*, Princeton 2008, pp. 175–230.

See also the interesting scenario that Daniel A. Bell sketches for the development of democracy in China in Daniel A. Bell, *Democracy with Chinese Characteristics: A Political Proposal for the Post-Communist Era*, "Philosophy East and West", 49/4, p. 451–493, as well as Bell's newest book: *The China Model. Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton 2015.

changed accordingly. Already during the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement of 1919, democracy and science were demanded; but after the sobering realization of Western double standards in international relations (the treatment of Chinese claims in the Treaty of Versailles), Marxism was also adopted from the West, and in most recent times the free market economy.

### Chinese "Marxism"

Marxism, as a product of the European Enlightenment, is usually said to have had three sources: English political economy, French republicanism and German idealist philosophy (i.e. Hegel). Properly speaking, it is not a philosophy but an economic and socio-political theory, critiquing the development of capitalism (a critique of the subject and of the egoistical individual, based on the right to property) and analysing the role of class struggle in systemic economic change. As the famous dictum of Marx goes: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it." As a pseudo-science, Marxism claims universal relevance of its analysis. Thus, Friedrich Engels, Marx' companion, put the development of their thought from utopianism to a scientific view in a noteworthy article from 1880 entitled: "Socialism: Utopian and scientific"<sup>22</sup>.

Further and complex developments changed Marxism considerably, such as the addition of Leninism (Marxism-Leninism) and in particular the development in China leading to Maoism and Chinese Marxism. Today, it is the official ideology and "order of discourse" in China.

The question arises why so many Chinese (and other Asian) intellectuals were drawn to Marxism. Marxism, enriched by Lenin's "Imperialism Theory" – and after the success of the "October Revolution" in Russia, 1917 – was widely considered to be the most advanced of Western thought. William Pfaff gives this explanation: Political leaders of Asian countries

"made use of Marxism-Leninism, a 'progressive', Western millenarian and revolutionary ideology that promised to be able to transport society into a new age, far in advance of not only the established and seemingly reactionary kingdoms and cultures of Asia but of the bourgeois capitalism and imperialism of the existing West as well. Thus the Chinese, Vietnamese, and other modern Asian communist movements

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/index.htm>. The original German title is more telling: "Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft" (The Development of Socialism from Utopianism to Science).

were inspired to believe they could, so to speak, leap over the imperialist and capitalist stages of Marx's historical and revolutionary scheme to arrive in a postmodern future through adoption of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and organizing Communist societies."<sup>23</sup>

The intellectuals of early modern China, educated in Confucianism, were intrigued by Marxism also because there are quite some similarities between the two doctrines: Just consider the basic Confucian orientation which sees the "people as the basis" (*min be* 民本) and put Mao Zedong's slogan "Serve the People" (为人民服务) next to it. Take some key phrases of Confucianism such as "The World Shared by All Alike" (天下为公) or the target of a society of "Small Prosperity" (小康) derived from this concept and compare them with the Chinese translation for "communism" as *gongchanzhuyi* (共产主义), which can be retranslated into English roughly as a "doctrine of common ownership". Moreover, it should be noted that, particularly in Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism (11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> c.), there was a strong focus on the "common" (*gong* 公) in contrast to the "private/selfish" (*si* 私). Another example might be an influential text from the early period of Chinese communism, written 1939 in Yan'an by Liu Shaoqi 刘少奇 (1898–1969), Mao's great adversary and most prominent victim of the Cultural Revolution, with the title "On the Self-Cultivation of a Communist" (论共产党员的修养)<sup>24</sup>. Here, Confucian moral demands (self-cultivation) are being reconciled with Marxist objectives. Finally, as already indicated, the Communist party continues the rule of a Confucian "meritocracy" with its own rule of a self-declared elite – which corresponds with the ruling of revolutionaries or Bolsheviks (Soviets) in Marxism-Leninism.

All this shows that – despite all the differences – there are certain similarities. Both doctrines are, in some ways, practical and society-oriented, and both appear to lack any interest in supernatural or cultic/religious themes. They are, so to speak, "civil religions". And yet, although Confucianism is not a religion in a strict sense, there are many religious elements in Confucianism: First of all, it is a tradition of a moral teaching – in this regard it is functionally equivalent to Christendom. There are Confucius temples in which rituals and a (state) cult were performed. Confucianism has canonical scriptures, and, lastly, Confucianism is an officially recognized religion of Overseas Chinese in Indonesia.

Needless to say, there are also many strikingly religious elements in Marxism-Leninism: For example, there are similar perceptions of history to that in the Christian tradition: at first we have a primordial society in the past, such as paradise, and

<sup>23</sup> William Pfaff, *The Irony of Manifest Destiny. The Tragedy of American Foreign Policy*, Walker & Co, 2010, p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> The title of the English translation is "How to be a Good Communist": <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/liu-shaoqi/1939/how-to-be/ch01.htm>.

millenarian visions or expectations concerning the future: the revolution must come; after that, there will be paradise again (on a higher level...)<sup>25</sup>. We find a sacralization of leaders, a "trinity", so to speak, of Marx, Engels and Lenin (later Stalin and Mao), and there are sacred or canonical scriptures, dogmas and doctrines. August Bebel, one of the early leaders of the social-democratic movement in Germany, referred to Marx' "Capital" as the "Bible of the workers' movement".<sup>26</sup> We encounter cults, such as around the red flag, or "immortality cults" through embalmmment. The working class was seen as "God's chosen people" – Ferdinand Lassalle, another early social-democratic leader in Germany, is said of having remarked about the working class: "It is the rock on which the church of today shall be build."<sup>27</sup> There were "martyrs" of the movement; in fact, the Bolsheviks were comparable to medieval knights of an order ("Party order"). In terms of moral conduct, poverty, as a characteristic of the proletariat, was seen as virtuous, whereas wealth, as of the capitalist, was considered to be vice. "Faith" was shown as obedience towards the teachings of the church as well as to the Party. Lastly, there was large scale killing of heretics, unbelievers and enemies of the movement – believed to be for a "good purpose"...

Marxism-Leninism can thus be viewed as a secular belief system, a "Soteriology", according to Leszek Kolakowski – i.e.: a teaching of mankind's self-salvation from worldly misery<sup>28</sup>. For this reason, Marxism-Leninism, as a civil religion, had structural similarities to the militant medieval Christian religion, that is, as an *ecclesia militans* (Gerd Koenen). It is interesting to note, that, responding to Karl Marx' famous dictum of religion being the "Opium of the people", Raymond Aron (1905–83) countered, that Marxism can be seen as the "Opium of the Intellectuals", so the title of one of his books of 1955 (referring to the allurements of Marxism to French intellectuals, in spite of the horrors of Stalinism in the Soviet Union)<sup>29</sup>.

It has to be added, though, that Marxism experienced a significant change or reinterpretation (or distortion) in the course of its reception in China – just like before in the Soviet Union: As a "Travelling Theory" (E. Said) it became Sinified, that is adapted to a Chinese environment. This was, of course, also due to the limits of translations and understanding of Marx' thought in this period. At the time of the foundation of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921, the works of Marx were hardly known or translated. Mao Zedong became acquainted with Marx's

<sup>25</sup> Gerd Koenen, *Die Farbe Rot: Ursprünge und Geschichte des Kommunismus* (The Colour Red: Origins and History of Communism), München 2017, p. 438.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>28</sup> So Kolakowski in the first volume of his work *Main Currents of Marxism*, cited after Koenen, p. 294.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1957.

thought first in the 1930s (through Stalinist interpretation); in fact, his policy can be described as using an internationalist ideology for the purpose of a national and anti-colonialist liberation struggle. Hence he wrote in the 1940s:

“To advocate ‘wholesale westernization’ is wrong. China has suffered a great deal from the mechanical absorption of foreign material. Similarly, in applying Marxism to China, Chinese communists must fully and properly integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution, or in other words, the universal truth of Marxism must be combined with specific national characteristics and acquire a definite national form if it is to be useful, and in no circumstances can it be applied subjectively as a mere formula. (...) Chinese culture should have its own form, its own national form.”<sup>30</sup>

Sinification also entails that Chinese intellectuals usually mean something quite different when they use “Western” terms of political philosophy, such as “dialectics”, “materialism”, “state”, “opening up”, “Marxism” – and “democracy”.

### Chinese “Democracy”

Concerning democracy, it has first to be acknowledged that democracy, as a way of government, has by now (though with different forms) acquired a universal and even normative relevance.<sup>31</sup> In an intercultural context, however, historical and cultural roots also play an important role. Although democracy is not a child of the Christian religion, it was developed, out of the American and French Revolutions (based on Greco-Roman prefiguration), in the Western world where, with Christianity, there was already an ideological basis well established that had a universalistic claim. Secondly, the functioning of Western style democracy – apart from the institutional separation of powers – is based on certain culturally distinct conditions: the idea of equality (originally of man before God, later before the law), the validity of context-independent laws (rule of law), as well as the determination of governance not by consensus but by carrying out a non-violent conflict (in the form of elections with the accompanying election campaigns) through which

<sup>30</sup> Mao Zedong, “On New Democracy” (1940). 所谓“全盘西化”的主张, 乃是一种错误的观点. 形式主义地吸收外国的东西, 在中国过去是吃过大亏的. 中国共产主义者对于马克思主义在中国的应用也是这样, 必须将马克思主义的普遍真理和中国革命的具体实践完全地恰当地统一起来, 就是说, 和民族的特点相结合, 经过一定的民族形式, 才有用处, 决不能主观地公式地应用它.

<sup>31</sup> The pressure of normativity appears to be so great that, lately, even bombs were used in order to further the advent of democracy. In this context, see also: Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, New York: Henty Holt & Co., 2006.

government authority is also legitimized. Democracy is, therefore, an essential and historically grown part of Western political culture.

Regarding the relationship between Confucianism and democracy, we can say that Confucianism is certainly compatible with democracy due to the Confucian emphasis on the will of the people (people-based thought). This has also been stressed already as early as 1958, i.e. in the famous "Neo-Confucian Manifesto" (宣言), written by the major Confucian thinkers of early modernity Tang Junyi 唐君毅, Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, Zhang Junmai 张君勱 and Xu Fuguan 徐复观.<sup>32</sup> Also, of the three main features of democracy which Abraham Lincoln mentioned in his famous "Gettysburg Address" ("of the people, by the people, for the people") the Confucian tradition accentuates at least one of them: "for the people". The father of the Chinese Republic, Sun Yat-sen, also emphasized in his "Three Principles of the People" (*Sanminzhuyi* 三民主义) "People's Welfare" (*min sheng* 民生); this third of his three principles is often translated as "Government for the People".

What is the specific Chinese experience with democracy? When it was established after the revolution of 1911, it did not function for a number of reasons. Liang Qichao (1873–1929) made the following interesting observations on a journey to the United States in 1903:

"When I look at the societies of the world, none is so disorderly as the Chinese community in San Francisco. Why? The answer is freedom. The character of the Chinese in China is not superior to those of San Francisco, but at home they are governed by officials and restrained by fathers and elder brothers. (...) Now, freedom, constitutionalism, and republicanism mean government by the majority, but the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people are like [those of San Francisco]. If we were to adopt a democratic system of government now, it would be nothing less than committing national suicide."<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly, Sun Yat-sen, who attempted to adopt Western political thought for a Chinese (Confucian) environment, made provisions in 1905 to establish, at least temporarily, a government of "political tutelage" (*xunzheng tizhi* 训政体制) – which, again, is very much in the vein of a Chinese "meritocracy". There is also, since then, a tradition of "political consultation", resp. consultative politics (*zhengzhi xieshang* 政治协商) that lasts until today.

<sup>32</sup> "A Manifesto for a Re-Appraisal of Sinology and Reconstruction of Chinese Culture" (为中国文化敬告世界人士宣言; *Wei Zhongguo Wenhua Jinggao Shijie Renshi Xuanyan*): [http://www.hackettpublishing.com/mou\\_zongsan\\_manifesto](http://www.hackettpublishing.com/mou_zongsan_manifesto).

<sup>33</sup> Liang Qichao, *Observations on a Trip to America, 1902–1905*, cited after David Arkush, Leo O. Lee (eds.), *Land Without Ghosts: Chinese Impressions of America from the Mid Nineteenth Century to the Present*, 1989, p. 92.

Successful democracies are favored by their own respective traditions (culture of contention, republicanism or liberalism) and by a growing middle class that demands participation. Can Western experiences or models, such as the American, thus serve as a blueprint for China's road towards democracy?

At this point, let us turn to a book for guidance that had a great impact on the discussions about democracy: Michael Sandel's, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. In some ways, the book (which has already been translated into Chinese<sup>34</sup>) is a continuation of his celebrated *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1985) that triggered the well-known liberalism-communitarianism debate. It might suffice here to summarize its thrust. Sandel shows the specific American experience of democracy to be a tension between civic republicanism vs. rights-based liberalism. According to Sandel, the United States are not founded upon liberal principles, but rather on civic republican principles. With civic republicanism (roughly a synonym for Communitarianism), he means an attitude of "deliberating with fellow citizens about the common good and helping to shape the destiny of the political community."<sup>35</sup> The goal of civic republicanism is self government in a community – in early American history this was attained mostly in farming communities. It involves the engagement of independent citizens, the cultivation of civic virtues, the seeking of economic justice, etc. At its basis is an Aristotelian understanding of civic republican virtues – virtues of character that are necessary for effective citizenship. Sandel, in fact, offers a communitarian critique of developments in the US since the constitution which he sees to be a development from republicanism to liberalism. He calls the outcome "procedural republic".

Sandel's critique of liberalism and his exposition of civic republicanism – for which it is necessary to cultivate public or civic virtues – offers rich resonances to Confucian concepts of virtue-based government.<sup>36</sup> Concerning self-government, there have been visions of this in the Chinese past, only to mention the above cited influential text from the *Book of Rituals* about the time of "Grand Unity". Another example from early China comes to mind which, again, is not a real case but a story of a utopian community: Tao Yuanming's 陶渊明 (365–427) story of the "Peach Blossom Spring" (*Taohua yuan ji* 桃花源记): It depicts a self-governed rural community of people who had escaped the harsh rule of the Qin Dynasty and lived according to the ideal of the "Grand Unity". As the story goes, the schol-

<sup>34</sup> 迈克尔·桑德尔, 《民主的不满: 美国在寻求一种公共哲学》.

<sup>35</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent. America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass. 1998, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> For a comparison between Confucianism and Communitarianism see: Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Communitarianism and Confucianism – In Search of Common Moral Ground* in: K.-H. Pohl (Ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context: A Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, p. 262–286.

ar who found his way to this secluded place attempted to find it again but failed. As a vision of an ideal society that cannot be attained, however, the story has had a great impact in Chinese cultural history until today<sup>37</sup>.

Leaving aside the inner American discussion about Sandel's book which is well documented<sup>38</sup>, it becomes clear that we have here a *very specific* American model – imbedded in an American narrative. Its context is a distinctive American history and political experience, beginning with the settling of Europeans on the American continent, inhabited by native peoples, with slavery being accepted and practised in British North America from early colonial times on.<sup>39</sup> Through the perspective of Sandel's book the American experience appears to be a unique experience; thus it should not be surprising that there are indeed considerable differences to European political histories and records, as Sandel says: "The United States (...) never was a nation-state in the European sense"<sup>40</sup> – One might add: What about non-European societies such as China?

<sup>37</sup> Even Mao Zedong alludes to it in his poetry, see his poem "Ascending Mount Lu" (*Deng Lu-shan* 登庐山) from 1959.

<sup>38</sup> Anita L. Allen, Milton C. Regan Jr (eds), *Debating Democracy's Discontent: Essays on American Politics, Law, and Public Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1998 (prominent participants were: R. Rorty, R. Sennett, Ch. Taylor, M. Walzer, A. Etzioni). One point of criticism is, for example, that *traditional* civic virtues may not be those most appropriate to the *contemporary* United States; another that self-government is modelled on American rural agrarian communities, i.e., questions about its suitability for modern city life.

<sup>39</sup> As the book deals very much with American history, it is interesting that it does not go back to the bloody conquest of the New World. It appears as if the European settlers found an empty continent, one that was not inhabited by native peoples. As the book largely deals with issues of justice and morality, the questions of morality and legality concerning the conquest of the Americas and the fate of the native population remain a blind spot. This historical short-sightedness might be, though, an essential part of American political-historical self-understanding throughout its short history. A notable exception is David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World*, Oxford 1992. It is interesting to note what Tocqueville says about this issue: "The Spaniards were unable to exterminate the Indian race by those unparalleled atrocities which brand them with indelible shame, nor did they succeed even in wholly depriving it of its rights; but the Americans of the United States have accomplished this twofold purpose with singular felicity, tranquilly, legally, philanthropically, without shedding blood, and without violating a single great principle of morality in the eyes of the world. It is impossible to destroy men with more respect for the laws of humanity." Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Ch. 18, (I B.10). Reading Stannard's book, though, one has the impression that Tocqueville's observation ("without shedding blood, and without violating a single great principle of morality") is quite benevolent and does not accord with historical records. In his latest film, "Where to Invade Next", the controversial film maker Michael Moore thus remarks *passim* that the United States were founded on genocide and slavery: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/23/movies/review-where-to-invade-next-michael-moores-latest-documentary.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, p. 346.



In turning back to China and most recent developments there, Yu Keping (俞可平) has made a case for democracy in China with his book *Democracy is a Good Thing* 《民主是个好东西》 (2006). Meanwhile there are elections in China to local People's Congresses (with relatively "independent" candidates), there are also approaches to an intra-party "democracy" with controlled transfer of power to the "most capable" – here we even might observe the adherence to a Confucian ideal that, given the dynastic rule in Confucian China, was never realized in the Chinese past. And we see sprouts of a growing civil society (NGOs). But interestingly, Yu Keping is not calling for a replica of Western democracy for China, but for a type of democracy that matches China's reality – for a democracy with "Chinese characteristics" (有中国特色的民主). It could be seen as a form of good governance, a rule of incorrupt technocrats. This means to say that Chinese "Socialist democracy" does not refer to a free civil society like in the West. In summary and as already mentioned, traditionally – and in the modern period – the Chinese form of government was for the people, and the meritocracy never gave rise to the idea of participatory rule *by/of the people*.

Hence, there appears to be widespread consensus, also today, among Chinese intellectuals that the Western form of representative democracy is no option for China. There are questions concerning the "will" and the education of the people – would this be the will of (uneducated) peasants and migrant workers (*yimin-gong* 移民工)? Most Chinese intellectuals thus favour the (traditional) option that only an "elite" is apt to address the concerns of the people. They give priority to a strong state and a stable system (social stability), i.e. to the building of a modern state – with long-term goals and planning as well as to a functioning economy (increasing prosperity) and poverty alleviation. The legitimacy of rule circles around efficiency in performance of the state. This, apparently, does not exclude some individual liberties and rights and some leeway for civil society, but private interests seem to be positioned behind the interests of the nation<sup>41</sup>. On the other hand, considering the consultative aspects and the ability to react flexibly to new situations, the Chinese model can be described, in the words of Christopher Heurlin, as "responsive authoritarianism".<sup>42</sup>

Hence, it might not be too far-fetched to envision in the China of the future the emergence of her own "democratic" system, adapted to Chinese standards, with a typical Chinese face, oriented towards Chinese cultural characteristics, with the use of its own cultural resources ("small prosperity"; "the world shared by all

<sup>41</sup> According to Jean-Louis Rocca, *The Making of the Chinese Middle Class. Small Comfort and Great Expectations*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher Heurlin, *Responsive Authoritarianism in China. Land, Protests, and Policy Making*, Cambridge 2017.

alike"; "people as basis", "meritocracy", "top-down civil society", "consultative politics" etc.). This might even be seen analogous to the Sinicized Marxism of Mao Zedong (and – long before that – Sinicized Buddhism). After all, autonomous developments in China (other than in the West) are desired also in other areas, such as management of population, energy, motorization, etc.

And here we might find a specific relevance of the American experience for the emergence of democracy in China: Political systems develop specifically from a local and historical setting – also in China. As Sandel says:

"The loss of the capacity for narrative would amount to the ultimate disempowering of the human subject, for without narrative there is no continuity between present and past, and therefore no responsibility, and therefore no possibility of acting together to govern ourselves."<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the long-term goal of this development in China will be a "leftist" Confucianism – or a mix of Confucianism plus Marxism plus democracy... China appears to be on its way to finding its own political course, specifically adapted to its particular situation – both geographically and historically: It might be remembered that it is not just a country, but a continent, and this with a population figure of 1.4 billion – incredibly large by our standards with respective accompanying problems. Also the history of Western colonialism in China (Opium Wars) and her own cultural traditions (Confucianism, Daoism) have to be considered. The Chinese intellectuals' quest for the last 100–150 years has always been to seek an autonomous political development in China. But the goal was at the same time a good mix of Chinese and Western elements (needless to say here that Marxism is not a Chinese but a Western tradition...<sup>44</sup>).

## Conclusion

According to Michel Aglietta and Guo Bai, the nucleus of the traditional Chinese system was a "bureaucracy controlled according to the ethical principles of Confucianism"; hence they conclude, "ethics must take over in the choice and the reproduction of elites."<sup>45</sup> Confucianism represents a rich pool of positive cultural and ethical resources. There was, however, in the Confucian tradition always the conflict between ideal and reality, that is the problem of "real existing" Confucianism.

<sup>43</sup> Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, p. 351.

<sup>44</sup> In fact it took its origin in Trier, a small town in Germany, where Karl Marx was born (and where the writer of these lines happens to come from).

<sup>45</sup> Michel Aglietta and Guo Bai, p. 304.

Reality rarely corresponded to the ideal (also not in European history). Criticism of Confucianism, thus, forms the main narrative of China's modernization, from the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in 1919 until the Cultural Revolution. As already said, the criticism might be justified in many respects; after the radical critique of tradition the question arises, though, if it was a wise decision to discard entirely all of the traditional ethical and political resources. Hence, a hundred years later, it might make sense to apply again queries of the Confucian ethical tradition to problems of the Chinese presence. There are, after all, a few traditional lines of conflict which are still relevant today:

- Is the “world shared by all alike” (天下为公) or is it a “family inheritance” (天下为家)? In other words, what should be in the foreground: the welfare of the people or the well-being of a few rich people, of party members and cadres? This touches, in general, on the question of corruption in China.
- “To take responsibility for the well-being of the whole world” (以天下为己任) – or to take responsibility only for the well-being of one's own nation? This concerns not only questions of nationalism and conflicts about sea-territories but also global ecological goals and climate change etc.
- Will the objective of a “harmonious society” (和谐社会) lead to more social justice? Will the gap between the poor and the rich be narrowed? Will the conflicts with national minorities (少数民族) be solved?
- Mencius' distinction between the “Way of the king” and the “Way of the hegemon” (霸道) and his insistence on “Humane Government” (仁政 / 王道) might be seen analogous to the question of adhering to the constitution or arbitrary rule. A “Humane Government” would manifest itself, for example, in a different treatment of political dissidence.
- Is the rule through the CCP a real “Meritocracy” (精英政治), that is, the rule of a genuine moral elite, or is it more in style of traditional “secret societies”? That addresses questions of transparency, accountability, rule of law, etc.

In conclusion, we might say that it is certainly an open question if democracy, according to Western standards, is the best solution for a country with a population of 1400 million people and with problems of a magnitude corresponding to the population figures. But with respect to the future prospects of the present “model” China, they might not be any worse if China were to follow more its own traditional ethical resources or, seen pragmatically, if China were to succeed in carefully reconstructing or expanding its existent meritocracy in the direction of good governance, just i.e. “humane government” and rule of law – and thereby, possibly, also developing its own form of democracy, thus wisely and further combining traditional Chinese and Western elements. Be that as it may, the ability to solve traditional tensions might very well determine also China's future fate.

**Keywords:** Political role of Confucianism, ancient Chinese thinkers, Chinese modernity, Chinese Marxism, democracy with "Chinese characteristics"