

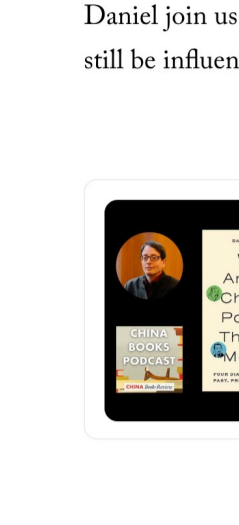


# PODCAST Ancient Chinese Politics with Daniel Bell

The Legalists and Confucians still run the show in today's China, argues a scholar of classical Chinese thought — but the Mohists and Daoists still have a voice in the debate.

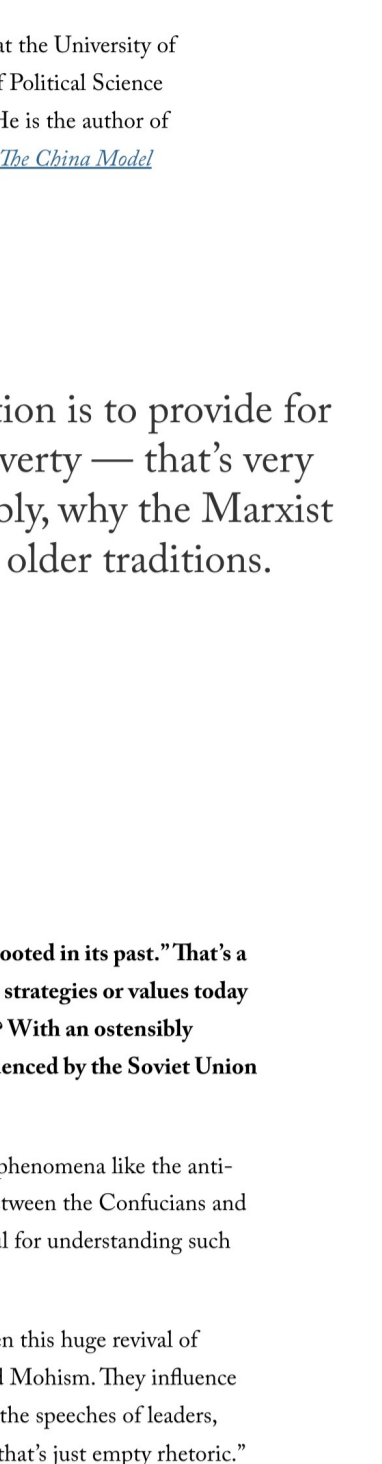
ALEX ASH — MAY 5, 2026

(CULTURE) (POLITICS)

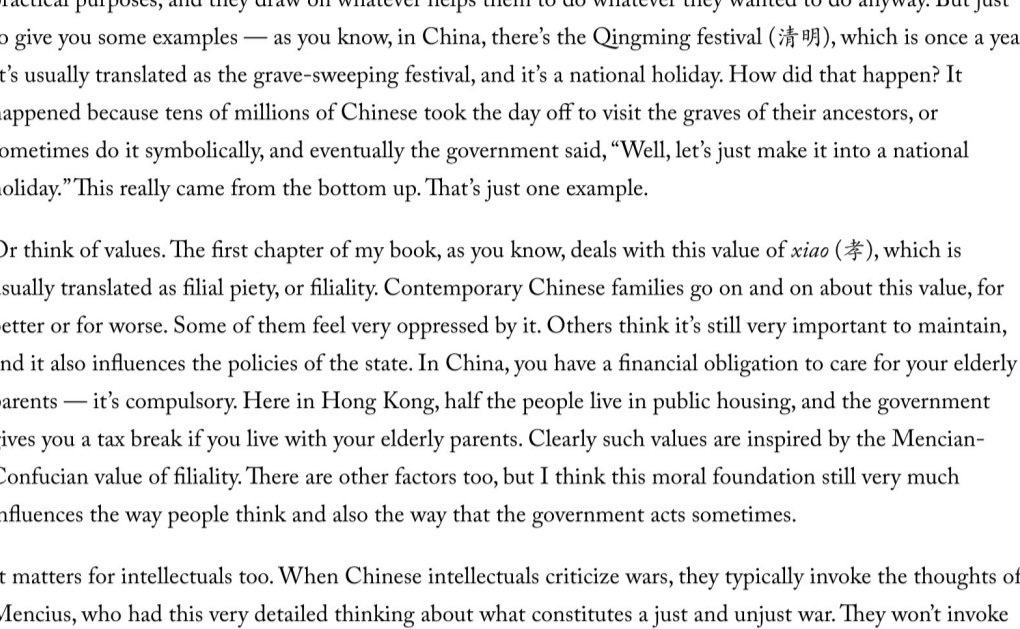


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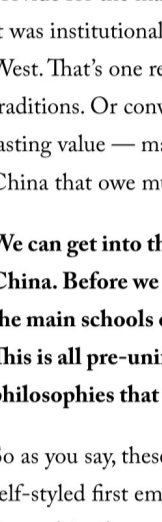
We're on a classical kick at the podcast, looking back at the classics of Chinese philosophy through a fresh light of the present. Last month we talked to Erin Cline on her new, women-forward translation of the Confucian Analects. Today we're expanding that scope to take in not just Confucianism but Legalism, Daoism, Mohism and other competing schools of ancient Chinese thought, specifically how they might be relevant to Chinese politics and culture today.



Joining us to talk us through it all is Daniel A. Bell, Chair Professor of Political Theory at the University of Hong Kong, and author of many works on China old and new. His latest book, just out from Princeton University Press, is [Why Ancient Chinese Political Thought Matters: Four Dialogues on China's Past, Present, and Future](#) (April 2026). It's an entertaining introduction that examines — in the form of lively dialogues between these schools of thought, set in the near future — their relevance to modern political questions in China and globally. We were pleased to have Daniel join us on the wire to explain why political debates from over two millennia ago might still be influential in Chinese policy and public debate today.



## Guest



Daniel A. Bell is Chair Professor of Political Theory at the University of Hong Kong. He was previously dean of the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University. He is the author of many books, including [The Dawn of Shandong](#) (2023), [The China Model](#) (2015), and [Beyond Liberal Democracy](#) (2006).

“The socialist idea that the government's first obligation is to provide for the material welfare of the people, or to alleviate poverty — that's very much a Confucian idea. ... That's one reason, arguably, why the Marxist tradition took hold: because it resonated with these older traditions.”

— Daniel A. Bell

## Transcript

Alex Ash: You write at the top of the book, quote: “China's political thinking is rooted in its past.” That's a relatively common sentiment, and there are often comparisons between China's strategies or values today and those of so-called ancient China. But how far can that connection really go? With an ostensibly Marxist state, China's contemporary politics strike me, at least, as far more influenced by the Soviet Union than by Confucius (孔子).

Daniel Bell: Of course, Marxism has great influence but if we want to understand phenomena like the anti-corruption campaign, the Marxist tradition doesn't offer that much. The debates between the Confucians and the legalists in ancient China over how to reduce corruption are much more helpful for understanding such modern phenomena. One of the most fascinating tendencies over the past few decades in China has been this huge revival of tradition — not just Confucianism, but other traditions like Legalism, Daoism and Mohism. They influence the way that people think and also what they do, including leaders. If you listen to the speeches of leaders, there are many references to ancient Chinese political ideas. You might say, “Well, that's just empty rhetoric.” But certainly in private settings — I don't have many connections among top leaders, but when we discuss, for example, the anti-corruption campaign, the essence is, now it's much more top-down, but at what point do we begin to move towards a more Confucian perspective? That's the sort of thinking that informs such policies.

One argument that's sometimes made is that this move back to embracing older thought on the part of China's contemporary state — references to its philosophical past, quoting the sages, the Confucius Institutes, the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics — some people put this forward as a form of soft power, but it's never more than lip service. So how relevant can the old wisdom be to modern politics, and to modern life in the 21st century?

At the highest levels of politics, no doubt there are politicians who misuse such ancient ideas for their own practical purposes, and they draw on whatever helps them to do that whatever they wanted to do anyway. But just to give you some examples — as you know, in China, there's the Qingming festival (清明), which is once a year. It's usually translated as the graves-sweeping festival, and it's a national holiday. How did that happen? It happened because tens of millions of Chinese took the day off to visit the graves of their ancestors, or sometimes did it symbolically, and eventually the government said, “Well, let's just make it into a national holiday.” This really came from the bottom up. That's just one example.

Or think of values. The first chapter of my book, as you know, deals with this value of *xiao* (孝), which is usually translated as filial piety, or filiality. Contemporary Confucians families go on and on about this value, for better or for worse. Some of them feel very oppressed by it. Others think it's still very important to maintain, and it also influences the policies of the state. In China, you have a financial obligation to care for your elderly parents — it's compulsory. Here in Hong Kong, half the people live in public housing, and the government gives you a tax break if you live with your elderly parents. Clearly such values are inspired by the Mencian-Confucian value of filiality. There are other factors too, but I think this moral foundation still very much influences the way people think and also the way that the government acts sometimes.

It matters for intellectuals too. When Chinese intellectuals criticize wars, they typically invoke the thoughts of Mencius, who had this very detailed thinking about what constitutes a just and unjust war. They won't invoke Saint Augustine or Michael Walzer. These ancient values and ideas very much inform the way everyday life works, the way that critical intellectuals think about the world and also the way the government justifies its policies.

So you're arguing that it is particular to Chinese culture, and that there's been something essential about Chinese political states and culture that has endured over two millennia, whereas other people might say that China has changed so much over the span of time that that's really not the same beast.

Both are true. There have been massive changes, but again does that mean that there's complete discontinuity from the past? You have to ask, The Marxist tradition obviously is hugely influential, but its obligations were influential and which parts were not? The kind of socialist idea that the government's first obligation is to provide for the material welfare of the people, or to alleviate poverty — that's very much a Confucian idea, and it was institutionalized for much of imperial China far earlier, actually, than you had social welfare ideas in the West. That's one reason, arguably, why the Marxist tradition took hold: because it resonated with these older traditions. Or conversely, you might want to say that the parts of the Marxist tradition that didn't have long-lasting value — maybe it's because they were inconsistent with these dominant strands of political culture in China that owe much to these older traditions, including Confucianism and Legalism.

We can get into the gap between ideal and practicing later — which certainly applies to all traditions, not just China. Before we get into your dialogues and juxtapositions, though, you give us that super-quick primer on the main schools of ancient Chinese political thought that you take in. What period are you drawing from? This is all pre-unification, right? Unification as in 221 BCE, not 1949. And what are the key competing philosophies that we'll be getting to?

So as you say, these are the political ideas and debates that were dominant before China was unified by the self-styled first emperor, Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇). And this was the Spring and Autumn (春秋) and Warring States (战国) periods, when the old kind of ways were breaking down. There was massive technological change. There were little states, and sometimes large states, constantly at war with each other. During the Warring States period, it became a time of almost totalizing warfare. So in some ways it was awful, and most of the thinkers at the time regarded their own times as awful. But what's interesting is that they had really different ideas for how to improve society.

You had debates between different schools. I should say that they became labeled as schools later, in the Han dynasty (汉). So these are the founding thinkers who were later lumped into different schools. The four major ones are Confucianism, of which, of course, Confucius is regarded as a founding father, but it's a much older tradition. It's mislabeled in English when we hear “Confucianism.” It sounds like Buddha and Buddhism, but he himself regarded himself as a transmitter of a much older tradition, which in Chinese is *ru* (儒). The other one is Legalism, which was far more influential in practice. In Chinese, it's *fa* (法). Sometimes it's translated as realism. These are really hardcore Machiavellians who say that we need to rely on animal means to strengthen the state, and they were constantly at war, so to speak, with the Confucians.

The other schools were Mohism, which was hugely influential — we can discuss that further — and Daoism, which was less of a political school. What's fascinating about these times is that they were also times of great intellectual ferment, and even though it was very violent and chaotic, but intellectuals — what we call intellectuals today — could roam from state to state to try to persuade rulers of their different ideas. They would sometimes literally debate and clash with each other. So these were arguments that are very vivid and very diverse, and they set the agenda for much of subsequent Chinese political thinking. That's why I limit myself to those debates in this book.

So you present the book as a series of dialogues taking place in the near future between descendants of these thinkers. That form is an homage to the Platonic dialogues. Why do it in separate form, and why in the future?

I confess I first came across the dialogue form studying Plato's dialogues at McGill University as an undergraduate. But it should be said that the Chinese dialogues are also — books or ideas are very much written in dialogue form as well, including the *Analeks* (论语) of Confucius. Or more recently, there's another work called *Dialogues of Confucius* (孔子家语). It's a great book, a new translation, by Princeton University Press. These *Dialogues* — they name each other and they argue with each other in their times. Xunzi (荀子) would go on and criticizing Mozi (墨子). Mozi would criticize Kongzi, Confucius. And Mengzi (孟子), Mencius, would criticize Mozi. And Zhuangzi (庄子), who subsequently became a founding thinker of the Daoist tradition, would invoke Kongzi in a very satirical work.

So these people were in dialogue with each other, and their works as we have them today are written very much in dialogue form. So in a way, it's paying faithful homage to what they were doing. But because I try to show the contemporary relevance of these dialogues, I basically set them in contemporary society in the near future, and I have the descendants of these traditions arguing with each other about issues that are timeless: just and unjust war, how to reduce corruption in government, whether the government should promote family law, whether government should promote the arts or material welfare. And I have descendants of their traditions argue with each other.

Now, you might say that sounds pretty crazy, but you'll remember that I worked at Shandong University (山东大学) for five years as Dean, and the party secretary who hired me was a 76th-generation descendant of Confucius. His family name was Kong (孔), and there's a family tree that traces his ancestry all the way back to the original Confucius, and he was very proud of his tradition. So it's only going a little bit beyond — of course, I take fictional license, but at least it's not that hard to imagine that we have descendants of these traditions that still strongly identify with the thoughts of their great ancestors. So in the case of the Confucian tradition, there are many descendants — great thinkers today who have this surname Kong, and you can trace their ancestry back to the original Confucius. Other traditions, not so much, so that's more, very much fictitious license. But that's one way I try to show that these ideas are still relevant today.

I've certainly met a lot of Chinese people nicknamed Kong who claimed to be descended from Confucius. The first dialogue is between such a Confucian thinker, Kong, and a Daoist thinker, Zhuang, who meet in a Hong Kong island bar. The fundamental tension here is between harmony and freedom, and you mentioned obligations to our parents. Can you tell us more about what they disagree over?

These traditions are very diverse, but Confucianism, at its core, holds that the good life involves nourishing humane and harmonious social relations, starting with the family and extending outwards. These social relations are the source of our joy and meaning in life, and we need to pay special attention to them and to nourish them in humane and harmonious ways. Whereas the Daoists had really quite a different view, especially Zhuangzi. It's very clear that he saw these social relations as a source of suffering, to a certain extent. It was quite a pessimistic view in that way, but he says that what we should do is lead a kind of free and easygoing life, to seek to minimize these social commitments and social attachments. In Chinese history, we have these competing views, right? Those who are inspired by Zhuangzi's view would become poets and live as hermits in the mountains and so on, whereas the Confucians were constantly striving to have harmonious families and serve the community.

So what does this mean in terms of family law? There are very much live issues. For example, to what extent should the state promote filial piety? In China, and also in other societies influenced by the Confucian heritage like Korea and Singapore, the state takes an active role in promoting filial piety, and sometimes makes divorce quite difficult, because the idea is that we should try to maintain families to the extent possible — or family bonds. Whereas Zhuangzi might have a different view: the state shouldn't involve itself — for one thing, in promoting family bonds, and if anything, the state should allow us to exit those bonds in as easy a way as possible. So I have them argue about that in a very concrete way.

What's interesting about Hong Kong is that, compared to the rest of mainland China, it's actually quite difficult to get divorced. So the descendant of Confucius is arguing that we should maintain these laws and not learn from the more liberal attitude to divorce that you have in mainland China. Whereas Zhuangzi, in the beginning, argues for a different view. I don't want to give away the ending, but in each dialogue, I have a kind of surprising ending.

But do you think that strict divorce laws in China bear the stamp of this sort of Confucian thinking?

Confucian thinking has much more to say about the relation between adult children and their elderly parents. That said, the relation between spouses was viewed as one of the five key ethical relations, and there was a view that it is very important to maintain and nourish those relations to the extent possible. So in that sense, the idea is that the state shouldn't necessarily bar exit from those relations, but maybe it should make exit more difficult, and give more time for those relations, if those harmonious relations are broken down, to be restored — for example, through mediation rather than using harsh laws or punishments.

The Confucian approach to managing social relations generally is to rely first and foremost on what you refer to as soft power, which means leading by example, or using rituals that provide a sense of community, or persuasion, with legal punishment as a last resort. But it doesn't mean that they're against legal punishment; it just means that it comes as the last resort. Whereas the Daoists would probably want nothing to do with this. The state should not interfere with people's easygoing, carefree and free way of life to the extent possible.

One of the fundamental paradoxes of Confucianism is whether you owe greater allegiance to your parents or to the state. How do you interpret that tension, and how has it played out in China since Confucian times? For example, in the Cultural Revolution, there are a lot of examples of people choosing the state over their parents.

Exactly. That's a debate more between the Confucians and the Legalists. The Confucians, as you suggest, say that we owe our obligations first and foremost to the family. There's this famous quote in the *Analeks* of Confucius that, “If your father steals a sheep, you should cover up for him. Don't go and denounce him to the authorities.” There's a big argument about what exactly that means. Whereas the Legalists were horrified by such views. They said, “Look, first and foremost, we need a strong state, especially in these times of chaotic and constant warfare.” And Han Feizi (韩非子) gave this fictitious example of a soldier running away because he had to care for his elderly father, and then he was rewarded by Confucius — and then Han Feizi says, “This is horrible. The whole army would break down if we follow these Confucian ideas.”

So this is a debate throughout Chinese history. As you suggest, in the Cultural Revolution, there was a time after 2,000 years of being dormant, the Legalist tradition was still very much there in practice, but finally it was affirmed: this is what — we are Legalist, and we're anti-Confucian. Children were encouraged to denounce their parents if they were counterrevolutionaries, for the sake of state power. That's very much a legalist view, and it was explicitly anti-Confucian in the Cultural Revolution.

But of course, they wouldn't have called it Legalist, right? That was presented as not anything to do with the four olds, or any old Chinese thinking. It was socialist.

It's true, but it's also true that the Legalist tradition was explicitly invoked at the time, including by Chairman Mao himself. The thing about Legalism is that it's very much critical of tradition, and of any old stuff. They say, we should do whatever is necessary now to increase state power, and these Confucians who appeal to the past for inspiration — they're just wasting their time, or sometimes doing harm. So no, the Legalist tradition was explicitly invoked. It was also a time when Confucianism was explicitly criticized.

This is a good segue to your second dialogue, Han versus ritual — as you already mentioned, Confucianism versus Legalism — between Han Feizi and Xunzi, a later Confucian thinker. And this one is specifically aimed how to reduce corruption and crime, which is very of the nose. Between this fear-and-punishment model of Legalism and the ritual-and-education model of Confucianism, which do you find has proved more effective in stemming corruption — a long-running problem in a vast bureaucratic state like China?

Let's first point a little bit of the context. Xunzi was the last great Confucian before the unification of China, and his student was Han Feizi, who went on to advise the Qin (秦) state to unify China according to these strict legalist principles, meaning that we should have a kind of military meritocracy. This he learned from Shang Yang (商鞅), who we discuss in another chapter — basically, this view that we should promote soldiers strictly according to performance, which is measurable: number of decapitated heads of enemy soldiers. And in what we call today domestic policy, we need to establish social order by means of fear. How do we do that? By means of legal punishments that are strictly, harshly and uniformly applied with no mercy or compassion shown.

They explicitly worried about corruption in those days too. It's a common theme throughout Chinese history. Why did the Ming dynasty (明) collapse? Why did the Qing dynasty (清) collapse? Lots of factors, but one commonly invoked reason is that corruption got out of hand. So this was a worry in those days too. Both [Han Feizi and Xunzi] agreed on the need to reduce corruption, which we can define as misusing public resources for the sake of private or family interests rather than for the state interest or the common good.

For Han Feizi, Xunzi's student, it was very clear that the only way we can do that is by using very strict punishments and *fa*. And arguably, that's the sort of idea that informed the early days of the anti-corruption campaign now. Whereas Xunzi was much more saying, “No, look, this might work in the short term, but it won't work in the long term, because if people are governed by fear, as soon as they get a chance to rebel, or as soon as they find an opening, they'll take it.” He predicted that the Qin state — it might be the most militarily powerful state now and might succeed in unifying China, but it won't last more than three generations, he said. In fact, it lasted 15 years, as we know. Arguably it's because it was too cruel, and could not maintain this sort of system. That was more or less Xunzi's view.

So Xunzi said, “If we want to reduce corruption, maybe harsh punishment will work for the short term, but in the long term, we need to change people's hearts and minds, especially of public officials, and they have to be sincerely committed to serving the public, even when nobody is looking over their shoulder.” He had a pessimistic assumption about human nature: “We all have a tendency to badness,” he said, “but we can improve. How do we do that? Through education, through having great teachers and through participating in these rituals that come with beautiful music, that generate a sense of community among participants and make those with power care about those with less power.” He says, “It's through these mechanisms — this is the only way to reduce corruption in the long term.”

If you ask for my view, I'm much more sympathetic to Xunzi's view. But I did try to be as fair as possible to Han Feizi. One test of the chapter that I have a friend — there are card-carrying Legalists today, both in China and outside — and he read the chapter and he thought Han Feizi's argument was much more persuasive than Xunzi's argument, even though my own heart lies more with Xunzi.

And for Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign, where have we settled now? People could argue that it was very effective, but what have been the risks and the downsides of that? And is it not, primarily in the Legalist model, a way to consolidate power rather than to get rid of corruption?

I think it's both. As you suggested, I think it has successfully reduced corruption among public officials — at least compared to what it used to be — and I saw that firsthand, more or less, serving as a public official at Shandong University. I described that to him in my earlier book. But of course, it doesn't seem to be uniformly applied, and some of the ruler's elites seem to be not as subject to harsh punishment. So in that sense, it's not Legalist, because the Legalist view — Han Feizi is very clear on this — is that it has to be uniformly applied, and regardless of how close you are to the ruler, you should be subject to the exact same rules as others. That's the only way to have an effective anti-corruption campaign. So in that way, arguably, it's not as Legalist as it could be.

But that said, there's still heavy reliance on fear. And — this is going a little bit beyond the book itself — one of the downsides is that it makes public officials very conservative and averse to taking risks. And I think that's not really good for China's future, because one of the reasons that China has done relatively well over the past few decades — hasn't gone to war, reduced poverty, and more recently achievements in terms of environmental sustainability and clean energy and so on — is that public officials are willing to take risks. But now, because of this fear of being implicated in the anti-corruption drive, otherwise talented public officials are keeping their heads down. I think that's a downside. So I think it's time to move towards a more Confucian-style way of dealing with corruption. This is my view, but again, it's not in the book — I'm just telling you now my own view.

In the third dialogue, between Mohists and the authors of the *Record of Music* (礼记) — but also influenced by latter-day Confucians — you explore whether communities and governments should fund cultural centers or prioritize material needs. So in this age of DOGE and battles over one-past-it, rather than just a luxury?

These are all debates, right? The Mohists were very much against these seeming luxuries. Their moral view is that the government should strive to be as impartial as possible. They should strive to promote benefits and reduce harm, and that they have a pretty narrow idea of what “benefits” means. It means providing food and clothing for the people, providing for basic material welfare. They criticized the Confucians for what they considered to be wasting public resources on very elaborate musical activities, funeral ceremonies and mourning ceremonies. Whereas the Confucians were saying, “Look, life is not just about having food and shelter, but also that even if you want to have a sustainable policy of any sort, you have to have social trust and harmony in society, and the way to generate that is through musical arts and activities.” So they were very much against the Mohists.

They were like fighting with each other literally in these texts. They both go on and on — Mozi and Xunzi in particular — criticizing the different views. So what I did in this book — I set it in a poor part of Shandong province, which I know pretty well because I spent five years there. I imagine a deliberative polling, and they have to ask the people, who are selected at random, many of whom are farmers, “Where should we spend resources? Should it be on providing for the material welfare of the people, or can we fund a cultural and musical center?” So I have them deliberate, drawing on the thoughts of Mozi and Xunzi.

I think these debates are relevant also in places that are even not so poor, because governments always face — including in Hong Kong now, which is relatively wealthy — how much should the government spend on subsidizing the symphony orchestra, rather than maybe thinking of schemes to provide for the welfare of poor people? These are very much live issues in wealthier societies as well.

Does that relate to corruption and excessive spending on banquets — marshaling of resources?

Both Confucians and Mohists would be against corruption. But what would be seen as? If banquets are a way of generating social trust and joy between the participants, then they wouldn't be as a waste of time, so long as they're relatively moderate, by the Confucians. Again, this is my own experience in Shandong province, where we had elaborate banquets, which were not so expensive, but it was a great way to generate joy and social trust and caring among the participants. They were heavily ritualized in a way that Xunzi would want, because he thinks that by participating in these rituals, it generates a sense of care and community among the participants. Whereas the Mohists would say they just don't get it. They think this is just a waste of time. We should directly spend the state's resources on helping poor people and the common people.

The fourth and final dialogue in your book, and perhaps the most controversial one, on the morality of military action, uses the views of Shang Yang, another legalist, and Mencius, another Confucian, to debate a potential invasion of Taiwan. Walk us through this dichotomy between realism and idealism, and the uses of military might. And how closely do you speculate that CCP internal debates over Taiwan might mirror it?

What's fascinating — again, the Spring and Autumn, and especially the Warring States periods, were a time when there was constant warfare. And what's interesting about these texts is that they have debates literally like this. The *Mencius* opens with Mencius openly criticizing a ruler of his day for carrying out what Mencius considers to be unjust war, meaning acquisition of territory and killing people just for the sake of enriching or strengthening one's own state. He thinks that's completely unjust, and he says that he tries to persuade the ruler to come around to this view. Whereas you had these thinkers that have come to be known as Legalists — the most influential is Shang Yang, because he also had great influence on the Qin dynasty — who said, “These Confucians and their morality, this is just a recipe for disaster. If we listen to their views, we lose. This is a world where the strong survive and the weak perish, and the only way to survive is to have a very strong state, and the only way to have a strong state is to favor soldiers and farmers and purge the rest of society — who are vermin, literally. And how do we have strong soldiers? By having this military meritocracy, as mentioned earlier, where soldiers are strictly rewarded according to objective performance, meaning the number of decapitated heads of enemy soldiers.”

This was adopted by the Qin dynasty more or less to successfully conquer other states and eventually unify China. But again, obviously that seems like such a cruel way of success. So the Confucian critics were saying that this won't lead to long-term success — it might lead to short-term success.

In terms of values, basically Legalism died out after the first short-lived Qin dynasty, mainly because Confucians were the dominant interpreters of the official state ideology, and they regarded the legalists as too inhumane and immoral. But in practice, arguably, the Legalists survived and influenced many of the policies, even though they weren't called as such. So now there's this whole debate about Legalist Confucianism, and to what extent that was part of Chinese history or not. And I think today, both traditions are still very much there.

What's interesting is that you have these two very extreme views. Mencius — he's an idealist, but he's also a realist. He's not a pacifist. He says he's in favor of defensive warfare. If you're attacked by another state for an unjust reason, you can defend yourself, but only on the condition that the people are willing to fight. If the people are not willing to fight, then they can flee, and you should just pack up your bags, and that's it. He even defends a kind of what we call today punitive expeditions: if you have a state that's a complete tyranny, and you can liberate the people from the tyranny, you can do that, so long as certain conditions are met — for example, the people have to greet the conquerors, and the greeting has to be long-lasting.

Whereas you have, on the other hand, these Legalists who are so extreme in this kind of Machiavellianism, they really make Machiavelli look like a kind of soft-hearted liberal. They're just saying, “This is a complete waste of time, when we're talking about warfare.” And you have these views articulated today. In the current Trump administration, you have some people who advocate views that are quite similar to these ancient views, where all that matters is power. You do whatever is necessary to maximize your power, and who cares about morality. You have to rely on cruel means — then that's what you have to do. Shang Yang even gave specific instructions: you have to be more cruel than your enemy. You have to do things your enemy is reluctant to do.

So in this last chapter, I think that the debate. Let's just imagine that Taiwan recognizes formal independence. And then it's quite likely that mainland China would be very tempted to use military force to — I guess. I don't know what's the right word — recover Taiwan, or conquer Taiwan. Let's try to imagine a debate in the Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China, where, like in the past, we had different thinkers arguing in front of the ruler. How would that look? So the point of this chapter is, of course, to present these ideas, to make the reader understand these debates, and then show that they're still highly relevant today.

And which side do you imagine the CCP, the Party, falling on between these two?

I don't want to give away too much of the book. I tried to present both views in a fair-minded way, and you'll recall that the ending is a somewhat surprising ending, so I don't want to say too much. My editor specifically said, “Don't do too many podcasts, because otherwise people won't buy your books,” so I tried to stick to that principle a little bit.

You've got to buy the book to find out the answer. But would it be a spoiler to say that, in your code of the Putsch meeting, they decide to silence Mencius? And does that map onto how you think the CCP allows and doesn't allow certain viewpoints, whether past or present?

If there is a context where war seems to be quite imminent, and I would expect that those who advocate different views might not have too much freedom of speech.

Was that the case in Confucius's time as well?

What's interesting is that you read Mencius openly criticizing a ruler — that's really hard to imagine today, any sort of thinker standing in front of the current ruler and just criticizing him. That's very hard to imagine. But let's be fair: China hasn't gone to war since 1979, which is a remarkable achievement, and hopefully that'll be maintained.

Certainly a longer run than America. In your previous work, you've argued that contemporary China is, in many ways, meritoric in the Confucian form — or at least you've engaged closely with that idea — and you've been criticized for that by other scholars who dismiss the meritoric model as a fiction that oversimplifies both then and now. What's your response to that, and has it changed over the years since you've published that work?

You'll remember I defined this ideal of political meritocracy — *shangyanzhi* (尚贤制) in Chinese. This is a view that the political system should aim to select and promote public officials with superior ability and virtue. And what's interesting in looking at these ancient debates is that it's just a Confucian idea: the Mohists had a very similar ideal, the legalists had it, except for the virtue part. That ideal had great influence. It was really the dominant ideal throughout Chinese political culture, and equally interesting, it was institutionalized in different forms throughout Chinese history, most famously by means of the examination system. So you had, for much of Chinese imperial history, starting from the Sui dynasty (隋) for about 1,300 years, a system where public officials, except for the leader himself, were selected by examinations and then promoted based on performance evaluations at lower levels of government.

Now, that's the exact system and form that you've had since the Cultural Revolution in China. The older tradition has been revived, both as an ideal and as a practice. There's a huge gap between the ideal and the practice, and in the book that I wrote, *The China Model*, I explicitly say that. What I try to do in that book is suggest ways of reducing the gap, but I'm certainly not saying that's the reality in China. I'm saying that's an ideal — it informs the way that public officials think, it informs this complex bureaucratic system, but there's still a huge gap between the ideal and the reality. And I think that's true today as well, in different ways.

But you think that they aspire to that ideal, even when so many of Chinese rulers have been the offspring of party elders?

Yeah, but it's different than imperial China, where at least the very top rulers would be the offspring. We don't have that so far.

Yes, we do. Direct Xi Jinping. We —

But he's not the direct [son]. The equivalent would be that Xi would be the son of the previous ruler, which would be the case in imperial China. But anyway, my point is that even if it's the offspring, doesn't mean that they're not talented or that they're not virtuous — that would be a defect of the ideal of political meritocracy. But that said, the ideal of political meritocracy assumes that everybody has equal opportunity to be put on the ladder for political success, and after that, they should be promoted according to superior virtue and ability. So if it turns out that most of the leaders are from a particular social class, or even family, then that obviously would suggest that ideal of political meritocracy is not working well, because it means not everybody has equal opportunity. So if the ideal of political meritocracy is working well, we would expect, for example, half of the rulers to be women, right? Obviously that's not the case, so clearly there's a huge gap between the ideal and the reality, and we have to think of ways of reducing that gap.

Do you think that the China model — to take the title of another of your recent theories, do you mentioned — whether that model is meritocracy or harking back to any of these ancient theories, do you think that this model is something other countries should aspire to? Can other cultures take the lessons of Chinese political thought that you talk about and apply it to the present, or is this particular to Chinese culture?

My view is closer to the latter. So you'll recall this idea of the China model. The idea is that at lower levels of government, you have more democratic mechanisms; in between, you have more room for experimentation when it comes to selecting leaders; and at the highest levels, it should become more meritocratic. Now, how do you do that? You need a very complex bureaucratic system, and in societies that don't have the history of this ideal of political meritocracy, even more importantly, that don't have this complex bureaucratic system which aims to select and promote meritocratic officials, then it's very hard to implement.

In contrast, for example, elections are quite easy to implement and export. It's not that hard, even a poor country to have democratic elections. But to have this literary meritocratic selection process, it requires a huge, complex bureaucracy and a certain amount of trust between the people and the rulers, and societies that lack that — it's very hard for them to adopt this kind of system. China makes no effort to export that model. So if you want to learn from it, fine, but parts of it — but not all — are not going to export it. It's not to say that China is against some universal human rights. We shouldn't, at least in principle, torture people. Slavery is bad. Genocide is bad. Nobody argues about that. But when it comes to what kind of political system is appropriate for a particular society, or how to select and promote public officials, then I think the dominant Confucian view, which I agree with, is that we should allow for variation.

We'll let listeners make up their own minds whether this China model is put into practice, or how far short of the ideals they fall on various points of the points that you raised. But as a final question, what do you think America in particular could learn from these thinkers and these dialogues — as that's the issue when it comes to military might and everything else that's at the front of our minds, perhaps even more so than China?

Let me try to think. I confess it's not a question I had considered. On these issues — for example, the first chapter is about family law, right, and to what extent there should be mediation before people are given the right to divorce — these are very much live issues that would be relevant in the U.S. as well. But at the highest levels of politics, it's really hard to see to what extent these sorts of ideas would be particularly relevant. But I hope I'm wrong.

Well, let's hope that from Washington to Zhongnanhai (中南海), some people are still reading the ancients, or maybe even picking up your book, to consider how they should be relevant today. I somewhat suspect that they're not, but it's certainly something that I think we ought all aspire to.

Again, I think to understand China, it's important. But whether it's easy to persuade people — I can't even persuade my own family members.

Well, they're not Confucian enough then. Thank you for coming on.

Thank you so much. I really enjoyed the discussion. ■

Alex Ash is a writer focused on China, and editor of *China Books Review*. He is the author of *Why Ancient Chinese Political Thought Matters* (2016), following the lives of young Chinese in Beijing, and *The China Model* (2024) about city escapes in Dali, Yunnan. His articles have appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic* and elsewhere. Born and educated in Oxford, England, he lived in China from 2008-2022, and is now based in New York.

