Daniel Bell: China's Ancient Political Ideas Shape the New World Order

Daniel A. Bell is a Professor, Chair of Political Theory with the Faculty of Law at the University of Hong Kong. Prof. Bell discusses ancient Chinese political philosophy and how it shapes the new world order. “Why Ancient Chinese Political Thought Matters”: https://www.amazon.com/clp/0691279802?lv=shuf&channelId=500 Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng Go Fund Me: https://gofund.me/09ea012f Buy Diesen merchandise: https://diesen-shop.fourthwall.com/en-nok Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL 00:00 The Importance of Ancient Chinese Political Thought 03:49 Contrasting Chinese and Western Political Philosophies 08:01 Unity and Political Order in Chinese Thought 12:09 Harmony vs. Freedom in Chinese Society 15:44 Political Legitimacy and Meritocracy in China 22:33 Plato's Critique of Democracy and Meritocracy 24:34 Corruption in Political Meritocracy 26:42 China's Rising Influence on Global Order 27:14 Great Powers and Global Responsibilities 29:05 China's Approach to Universalism 30:21 Managing Rivalries Among Great Powers 32:42 Engagement and Cooperation in International Relations 35:21 Continuity and Change in China's Political Landscape 39:09 Optimistic Scenarios for China's Future 41:55 Combining Marxism with Cultural Traditions

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. We’re joined today by one of my favorite authors and academics, Daniel Bell. He’s a political philosopher and a professor of political theory at the University of Hong Kong, and he’s well known for his excellent work on Confucianism and Chinese meritocracy. Thank you for coming back on the program.

#Daniel Bell

I’m happy and honored to be here again.

#Glenn

So again, you have a lot of excellent books out there. I remember when I used to teach my students about Chinese meritocracy, we would, of course, focus mainly on your work. But you have another book out now called *Why Ancient Chinese Political Thought Matters*. I guess a good place to start is with that question: Why does ancient Chinese political thought matter?

#Daniel Bell

Well, I mean, I've been teaching it for about three decades—not just Confucianism, but also Taoism, Mohism, and Legalism. All of these emerged during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, before China was unified in 221 BCE. So you have these great thinkers debating issues of timeless value. And I thought, well, it's not that well known, especially among English-speaking audiences. You know, for example, we read Plato's Republic. Nobody doubts it's a great work. But how many people know that Xunzi, a Confucian thinker near the end of the Warring States period, wrote a book that's as deep, systematic, clear, and influential as Plato's Republic?

So the first reason it matters is that these are great works that aren't so well known outside China. I thought it was important to show that. And the way I did that, as you know, was to write the book in dialogue form. I have these thinkers debate each other about issues that still matter today. The second reason is that these debates had a great influence on Chinese history. But the third reason, which is perhaps the most relevant for our podcast today, is that these issues are still so relevant.

They were debating issues like just and unjust wars, you know? I mean, that's obviously highly relevant today, right? So in one of the chapters, I imagine a debate in the Politburo Standing Committee about whether mainland China should "liberate" or "invade" Taiwan if Taiwan declares formal independence. The Legalists and the Confucians take different sides on this. Another debate is about how to reduce government corruption. I mean, this is so topical in China now, right? If there's one signature policy of the current government, it's this anti-corruption campaign. But what's the best way to reduce corruption?

So you have these debates between the Confucians, who say we have to rely on what we call soft power today, and the Legalists, who say, "No, we need harsh punishment and fear. That's the only way to control corruption." These debates go back to the Warring States period, and they're still being framed in the same terms today. And, you know, if you look at liberals and Marxists, they have hardly anything to say about these debates. So these ancient debates set the terms for contemporary issues. Another issue I look at is family law. Do we have an obligation to support our elderly parents?

I mean, in Confucian ethics, this value of xiao, or filial piety, is so central. And even today, in countries with a Confucian heritage—not just China—the state sometimes uses indirect means, like tax policy, and sometimes direct means, like requiring you to care for your elderly parents. I mean, I'm Canadian. That'd be so strange in Canada, right? But again, what's the best way of doing that? You have these debates. Another debate I cover in the book is, well, should the state provide direct aid to the poor, or should it use indirect means?

For example, the state could fund music that creates a sense of community and encourages the rich to provide for the poor. I mean, these debates are still very much alive in contemporary China. My point isn't that everything today can be traced back, you know, 2,300 years. It's just that, on certain

key issues, the terms of the debate were set many, many years ago, and they still shape how people in China debate those issues today. But I also think these debates have universal value, just as Plato' s Republic has universal value to a certain extent.

#Glenn

Well, I'm glad you brought up Plato's Republic. But how would you contrast ancient Chinese political philosophy with Plato's thought, or with Western thought more generally? I mean, how do you see those traditions differing on issues like war, peace, and international order?

#Daniel Bell

Yeah, well, one clear difference is how these debates are relevant today. I mean, you know, if I were to invoke Plato in a discussion about contemporary international conflicts, people might think it was a little strange. Although, of course, we now know that one idea from ancient Greece—not from Plato, but from Thucydides—does have value today: Thucydides's trap. But the point is that in Chinese culture, intellectuals, political reformers, and leaders invoke these ideas from the past on an everyday basis. In terms of content, I mean, one thing about China is that war has never been glorified. It's always been viewed as something that humans detest.

It's hell. That said, it's sometimes viewed as necessary, so there's a debate: Under what conditions should we go to war? The Confucians said we need very clear conditions for a just war. If a larger neighbor invades you, and your people are on your side and don't flee the country, then you're morally justified in defending yourself. The Legalists' view sounds more contemporary in many ways. They would say, "Look, we live in what we would call today an anarchical world, right? Each state competes for power and can do whatever it can to increase its power, including going to war."

So you had these debates, but unlike the ancient Greeks or Romans, the Legalists never said war was a good thing. They didn't say, "Wow, we can become heroes, and we value bravery." They said, "No, war is hell. Nobody wants to die." So the only way to motivate soldiers, in their view, was to make things even worse for them if they deserted. For example, "If you desert, we'll kill not just you, but your whole family." That's how they thought you could motivate people, not by telling them that going to war was a beautiful, honorable, and brave thing to do. That's a very important difference between the ancient Chinese and the ancient Greeks and Romans. In ancient China, you don't find this idea that war can be a good thing.

#Glenn

That's interesting. Again, I think now that we're seeing the era of Western dominance come to an end, it's not just about power. The influence of these ideas will be felt more strongly. And it's good

to know what the main ideas in China are, of course, given that it's now the leading economy. But how does Confucianism, for example, or Chinese political thought more broadly, view political and social order differently?

#Daniel Bell

So in international relations, there's this ideal that unity is better than division, right? Even in the Warring States period, when China was divided into competing states that fought ruthlessly with each other, different thinkers had different ideas about what to do, but they all agreed on this idea of unity. The ultimate aim was a unified political community. That's been central to the Chinese outlook, and it hasn't changed. Of course, there have been periods of division, but even then, division was seen as something abnormal that needed to be corrected. So this view that China should strive for political unity is really, really central to its political culture.

But there's less of a missionary impulse. In the West, maybe because of the influence of Christianity, or more recently because democracy is viewed as a universal ideal, there's this idea that we can try to export our ideals abroad, sometimes using force. That's completely foreign to China. I mean, in China, there's a recognition that our political culture here is quite distinctive and it's not for export. So once we have a unified political community in China, we're not going to try to export our way of life to the rest of the world. I mean, that's a very important difference, I think, when thinking about international relations. Another thing is that, you know, at least for the Confucians, they're not against hierarchy in international relations. Of course, some states are going to be larger and more powerful.

So here again, you have the Legalists, who say it's fine for powerful states to bully smaller states as long as they can get away with it. But the Confucians say we need to recognize hierarchy, and that larger states have more obligations. They need to think of ways to structure international relations so that they benefit both larger and smaller states. So in China, on issues like climate change, the thinking is: Of course we need to take more responsibility than smaller states because we're a big state, right? On AI regulation, of course we need to take more responsibility. So the idea is that because we're a large state, we have more obligations to the rest of the world than smaller states do. I think that's very central to Chinese culture too.

#Glenn

Yes, you mentioned the focus on unity. I mean, you can see it in some of the popular culture as well. I remember about 20 or 25 years ago, there was this movie starring Jet Li called Hero, in which he seeks revenge against the king for the destruction of his homeland. It's a little like a Hollywood script: at the end, he finally faces the king and has the opportunity to kill him. But then the king says, "Well, I just have one thing to say." And he says something like, "Well, we've always been killing each other."

"If you kill me, you know, we're going to be divided again." So once he realized that the king's ambition was to unify China and put an end to generations of fighting, he gave up on revenge and ended up getting killed himself. That's where it kind of deviated from the Hollywood plot, because you didn't really see that coming. I know it's a bit superficial, but it does speak to your point that unity kind of has to come first. That makes sense if you're a country that big and you have that kind of history of division. Yeah.

#Daniel Bell

I think that's the Zhang Yimou movie, if I'm not mistaken. And see, again, there are these contrasting traditions, right? One is the Confucian tradition, which says that the way to rule and attract others is through moral example, through participating in rituals that generate a sense of community, through persuasion and education, and through providing for people's basic material needs. But the other strand is the Legalist tradition. To repeat, they're really hardcore, even more into realpolitik than Machiavelli. I mean, whatever works to expand your power is fine. No limits. No moral limits.

So this movie was more Legalist in its inspiration because Qin Shi Huang, the self-styled First Emperor of China, unified China according to Legalist principles. It was a strict military meritocracy. Soldiers were promoted based on how many enemy soldiers they beheaded. So if I killed three and you killed two, I'd get promoted. It didn't matter what went through our minds. And those cruel means were successfully used to unify China. But, you know, one of the most famous Legalists was Han Feizi, who systematized the tradition. I have a chapter on him in the book.

But his teacher, Xunzi, was a Confucian, and he criticized his student. Before the state of Qin unified China, he said, "Look, this might work in the short term"—which it did—"but these cruel methods can't work in the long term because eventually people will rebel against them." And it turns out he was right. The Qin dynasty, which first unified China, lasted only 15 years. So anyway, the point is that this movie is more Legalist in its inspiration. But again, whether they're Legalists, Confucians, Mohists, or even Taoists, they all agree on the need for political unity.

#Glenn

What about issues like the balance between freedoms and social harmony, and the foundation of political legitimacy? How would Chinese thought differ on these issues?

#Daniel Bell

So the Chinese idea of harmony is a little different from what we mean by "harmony" in English. In English, we tend to think of harmony as a kind of unity or sameness. But the Confucian idea makes an explicit distinction. There's a famous saying that every Chinese intellectual knows, you know, almost like "To be or not to be" in English: "Harmony without uniformity." It means that we should

pursue diversity within harmony rather than sameness, conformity, or uniformity. So there is this idea of harmony, but we take differences for granted, and even conflict and dissent. The question is, how do we deal with them?

First, it has to be peaceful. And second, you're trying to create something that's more beautiful and also more moral than the sum of its parts. So they give examples like soup. It tastes bland if you have just one ingredient, like salt, but if you mix in a lot of different ingredients, it tastes better. In politics, too, they say that if there's only one view among the ministers, nobody can criticize the ruler when he makes a mistake. And that's a recipe for disaster. We need different views, different criticisms, and different perspectives among the ministers. So in politics, harmony means valuing diversity, almost celebrating it.

The question is, how do we deal with those differences in a peaceful way? And how do we try to ensure that the different parts interact so that something more beautiful comes out of that mixture? That's the basic idea. But as your question suggests, there's sometimes a tension between harmony and freedom. As you know, I have a chapter on that in my book. They do pull in somewhat different directions, especially when you think about harmony in the family. Again, there are differences within a family, right? You know, elderly people and young people are different. Siblings of different ages are different.

You know, women and men are different. Wives and husbands are different. Fine. But despite all those differences, some of our obligations are almost beyond choice. Take the idea of filial piety again: we have obligations to our elderly parents, you know, and even to our ancestors who have passed away. I mean, look, as I mentioned, I'm Canadian. The basic idea I was taught was that when I'm young, my parents take care of me, and I need to listen to them and, more or less, be loving toward them. When I'm 18, if I choose to separate from my parents, fine, I can do that. From the Chinese perspective, those obligations are basically beyond choice.

You're always bound by those relationships, and sometimes they place limits on your freedom. So, to go back to this example, there's a financial obligation to care for your elderly parents in China, Singapore, and other societies with a Confucian heritage. Or take Hong Kong, where I am now. If you live in a publicly subsidized flat, you can get a tax subsidy if you live with your elderly parents. The assumption is that the state has an obligation to help you fulfill your obligations of filial piety. And again, those obligations sometimes place limits on our freedom, so there's a tension here too.

#Glenn

Yeah, well, that view of social harmony is kind of interesting because in liberalism we always have this internal contradiction. On the one hand, we recognize that everyone has their own path to the good life, so we need tolerance because we're all different. But at the same time, we assume that liberalism is universal, that we all follow the same path to development. So we come up with liberal principles, but you're not allowed to deviate from them, essentially. There's always this internal

contradiction. And with harmony, you and I have discussed this in the past. Often, when we talk about harmony in the West, the idea is that we all begin to follow the same universal path. We become the same dish, if you will. But in China, harmony is more about preserving those differences. So how do they manage them?

#Daniel Bell

It's more than that. I mean, in the West, we use the word "toleration," and as you just said, it's central to liberalism. It's more like, "You know, I don't like it, but I'm going to hold my nose." For example, I don't like pornography, but I'm going to hold my nose and let it be because people have the freedom to engage in it or read it if that's what they want. But the Chinese idea of harmony isn't just about tolerating something and holding your nose. It's about having some mutually productive interaction between the different parts. I mean, it's more ambitious than just toleration. It's very hard to do, but that's the ideal.

#Glenn

Well, how about the moral foundations of political legitimacy? I mean, there could be something to contribute there as well. One of the big concerns I often talk about is that we might be heading toward a crisis of political legitimacy in many Western countries. I think part of the reason is that we put too much weight on the idea that as long as we have elections and elect our leaders, they're legitimate, as if elections were the sole source of legitimacy. I think that's a miscalculation, and we'll soon discover that elections alone don't seem to be enough. So I was just wondering, how do the Chinese view political legitimacy?

#Daniel Bell

Yeah, well, I guess the key difference is this: As you say, in the West, legitimacy comes from government by the people. You know, if people choose their own leaders through elections, they've given their consent to be governed by those leaders. And that doesn't depend on the level of government, the political culture, or the history. That's how you get legitimacy. But in China, legitimacy depends more on politics for the people, not just politics by the people. The whole point of government is to serve the people, meet their basic needs, and look after their interests. And the way to do that is to have a political system that aims to select and promote public officials who have the ability and the motivation to serve the people.

So this idea of political meritocracy—in Chinese, it's called *xian neng zheng zhi*—goes way back in Chinese history, and it's still very much central to the political culture today. That's not to say there's no place for government "by the people." Of course there is. But in some sense, it's fundamentally subordinate to government "for the people." And how do you put "by the people" into practice? Well,

elections are one way, but there may be other ways. Maybe elections at lower levels, like in villages, are important. Or you can have very healthy and robust consultative mechanisms. That might be good enough in a political system like China's if government "for the people" works well.

#Glenn

As I said in the introduction, you wrote this book on meritocracy. What's the argument here, though? There's no perfect system, but what's the argument for meritocracy over democracy?

#Daniel Bell

Well, first of all, it's quite contextual, right? It only works in a large state with a very complex bureaucracy and mechanisms for selecting and promoting public officials who undergo decades of training before they reach the pinnacle of political power. And it won't work in states that lack a political culture that values political meritocracy. In China, according to surveys, people also judge their political leaders by how well they meet these standards of political meritocracy. So it's quite contextual. Again, there's no effort to promote it to the rest of the world. If people want to learn from China, fine. But China will never invade another country to promote it.

What are the advantages of it? Well, one is that all the leaders have political experience, right? If you're anywhere near the top, you have literally decades of political experience, so you won't make beginners' mistakes. Second, and most important, I think, is that you can take a long-term view. You don't have to worry about the next election. So on issues like climate change, you know, you can plan decades ahead. And that's why China emerged as a green superpower. You know, it wasn't just under the current president, Xi. It goes back to Hu Jintao, too. The shift toward solar power and electric cars had already started under Hu.

You can plan decades ahead, and that's why China can emerge as a global green superpower. That would be very, very hard to do, maybe even impossible, in an electoral democracy, frankly. And I think the third advantage is that leaders can focus on solving problems. Think of a big country like the U.S., where leaders have to waste time giving speeches over and over again and raising tons of money. You know, you don't have to do that in China. You can focus on solving problems. Of course, there are problems, right? How do you limit the power of rulers? Maybe we can discuss that too. That's a more obvious issue in political meritocracies.

#Glenn

Yeah, since you mentioned Plato earlier, that was one of his main criticisms of democracy: it elevates popularity over competence. I think he writes something along those lines: if you want a good captain for your ship, you want someone who knows how to sail, not someone who can

persuade an audience. Democracy essentially rewards the ability to manipulate the masses over competence, so I can see what meritocracy brings to the table. Of course, meritocracy can create some rot in the system too, you know, if it becomes corrupt.

#Daniel Bell

I think it's great to make that comparison with Plato because his book, The Republic, is basically a defense of political meritocracy. It's a very similar idea, right? Leaders train for decades, and you want them to be committed to the community and to have political experience and good political judgment. But today, when we read The Republic, we don't think, "Oh, wow, this is a source of inspiration for our current political culture," right? Things have changed so much. But in China, when we read those great Confucian classics, we still think, "Wow, these really are a direct source of inspiration for our current political ideals and for how to limit corruption."

Again, that's a huge problem in any system that aims to be a political meritocracy, because the leaders are supposed to serve the people. But if they misuse public resources to serve their own interests or their families' interests, then they're corrupt. So how do you limit corruption? This is a big problem for defenders of political meritocracy. Plato's solution was to abolish the family, right? And to abolish private property. But that's crazy, right? That's utopian. That'll never happen. And, you know, of course, some Straussian theorists say, "Well, he wasn't serious," or whatever. But in China, how to limit corruption has been an ongoing concern precisely because corruption is a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the whole system.

If the leaders are corrupt, it means that political meritocracy isn't doing what it should. It means that the system is fundamentally illegitimate. So throughout China's history, you've had these debates about how to limit corruption. And today we're still having those same debates. One of the issues in China now is that—well, maybe this is a little sensitive, but when the current anti-corruption campaign started, it seemed at first to be inspired by what we'd call Legalist methods today: using harsh punishments for corrupt officials to spread fear throughout the system and make sure public officials don't misuse resources.

But at a certain point, it has a horrible side effect: public officials become very conservative and risk-averse, and they don't experiment as much. That willingness to experiment was key to China's success. So some of us thought there would eventually be a shift toward a more Confucian approach to dealing with political corruption, relying on moral education, rituals that build a sense of community, and so on. But that hasn't happened yet. That's an issue. I discuss that debate in chapter two of the book. Please pardon the self-promotion, but it's something that really matters, frankly.

#Glenn

No, no, but I think it's good not just to draw contrasts but also to point out some of the similarities in the literature, because we often exaggerate the differences between us and them. If you read Plato's work, you find a lot of the same ideas that you find in Chinese thought. I think that's worth noting. But again, this isn't just for academic textbooks. As I said before, as China rises, the world order will inevitably change, and Chinese philosophy and political thought will begin to shape or influence the international system to a greater extent.

And we have a case study of this now. The unipolar world has come to an end, and I think we all recognize that. We've just had this meeting in China between Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump. Again, I think calling it another Yalta was a bit of an exaggeration. But that being said, it does seem to usher in a new international order in which the dominance of the political West is being replaced by a new concert—not a Concert of Europe, but a concert of the great powers. What' s China's view of this international order, though? What ideas can we expect China to want to bring to it?

#Daniel Bell

So, again, it's this idea that the great powers have more responsibility, right? On issues like regulating nuclear weapons or figuring out how to limit AI, of course it makes sense to get together with the other great powers. And of course it makes sense for China and the U.S. to engage in direct dialogue and cooperate on those issues. I think in China there's less of what you might call hypocrisy, you know? Of course we're a great power, so we have more responsibility, and we need to engage more with other great powers on these world-shattering issues. I'm from Canada, and I'd love it if Canada and China had these G2 dialogues, but it's not going to happen, right?

Because what Canada does on climate change isn't going to shake the whole world, but what China does might, you know, and what the U.S. does might. And Russia, of course, is obviously so important when it comes to nuclear weapons. So I think it's good in some ways for those great powers to get together to discuss these issues of global importance, as long as—and again, this is the Confucian view—they recognize that they have to think about how to build mutually beneficial relationships with smaller powers, right?

So let's just imagine that China and countries like South Korea were to come together in some sort of East Asian Union in the future, roughly similar to the European Union. It would only make sense if it were beneficial not just for China, but also for smaller powers like South Korea and Vietnam. There might be some shared Confucian values that bind them together, but it has to be a system that's mutually beneficial. And then when it comes to these global issues, well, China is going to take the lead. You know, that's just the way it's going to happen and, frankly, the way it should happen.

#Glenn

Well, I had a question about universalism here, in terms of how China seeks to harmonize relations with others. As you said before, harmony isn't about everyone becoming the same blob. It's about managing differences so that the different parts can work together. But for that reason, China also rejects universalism. You've seen Xi Jinping argue that we need a Global Civilization Initiative. The idea is that it's not up to one civilization to tell another how to develop. So again, that's a rejection of the universalist idea. I often make the point that if we're worried about China becoming a hegemon in the future, we should be happy that it doesn't seem to claim the right to define how other peoples should develop. That's the kind of universalism you usually see in a hegemonic power. But if China rejects that kind of universalism, how does that translate into international politics? How would an international system be organized based on these ideas?

#Daniel Bell

So it's not really a blanket rejection of universalism. You know, in its official discourse, China doesn't reject some of the things we call universal human rights today. Don't kill innocent people. Slavery is bad. Genocide is bad. Torture is bad. There's also the idea that people have a right to basic material well-being. I mean, China doesn't always use the language of rights, but those are universal goods, and I think China recognizes that. The question is, how do we organize our society? How do we select public officials? How do we structure our economy? The answers to those questions aren't universal.

In the West, these things are often packaged together. I'm sure this sounds polemical, but I think it's roughly true: especially since World War II, there's been a view that liberal democracy is universal, that capitalism is universal as an economic system, and that this is the future of the world. China doesn't have that view. Yes, of course, we hope for global peace, for a world where nobody is subjected to torture, murder, slavery, or genocide, and where everybody's basic material needs are met. Yes, that's universal. But when it comes to how we select political leaders or how we structure our economies, we should allow for pluralism, for different ways of doing things. I think that's the key idea that will come from China.

#Glenn

Coming back to this G3, the three great powers that met in China, who counts as a great power? Should we put India into the mix? That's all up for discussion, of course. But these three powers are very active in global geopolitics and geoeconomics. What are the limits here? How can the rivalry between China and the U.S. be managed? And on the other side of the ledger, how do you see the strategic partnership between China and Russia? Is it just about the traditional logic of the balance of power, or do you see a competition of ideas? How do you interpret this triangle?

#Daniel Bell

So again, if you want to protect shared values like the right to life, the best way to do that is to engage with the great powers that can do something about it. People shouldn't be killed in a nuclear war, right? I mean, that's a universal value. I think that's the basic logic. The idea isn't that each great power gets its own sphere where it can bully its neighbors. I mean, as I mentioned, that's not part of China's view.

I mean, of course, China's Legalist political tradition would strongly endorse that, but Confucians would reject it. So again, it's not so clear what China is. My view is that, when it comes to international relations, China hasn't gone to war since at least 1979. And when China proposes ways of dealing with other countries, it tends to propose win-win scenarios, at least in its official discourse and, to a certain extent, in practice as well. That's more Confucian in orientation.

#Glenn

I can understand some of the concerns in the West and beyond about the rise of China. I said that in a few interviews when I was in China recently. It's such a huge country, and it's changing so rapidly that it takes everyone by storm. And people don't really know much about it, which is a bit absurd. We seem to know everything there is to know about the United States, but we don't know much about China. I'm not going to say China appeared out of nowhere, but this was one of the consequences of the most rapid shift in the international distribution of power in history. And it happened through peaceful means, too.

So I can understand why there's some concern. We don't know exactly what China is. All we know is that it will transform the whole world. When I was in China recently, I thought to myself that if you were a China expert ten years ago and you haven't been back since, you're probably not a China expert anymore because it changes so fast. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm not pretending to be a China expert. On the contrary, I know very little. But given that China is changing so fast, what will it look like in ten years? How do you think it'll be different from the way it is today?

#Daniel Bell

So, yes, there's rapid change, but there's also this deep continuity, right? And that's what I'm trying to show in this book. These debates between the Confucians and the Legalists, you know, were central over 2,300 years ago, and they're still very central today. And they'll continue to set the terms, more or less, for debates between Maoists and Taoists as well. Now I'm going to add something that's not in the book but that I think is important. As you know, China is also officially a Marxist country, right? And there's this idea that the communist ideal matters and that, to a certain extent, it will shape China's future.

One development in political theory that I find very exciting is that serious Marxist scholars are engaging with this vision of higher communism. You know, Marx's idea of higher communism is that

advanced machinery would take care of socially necessary work, freeing people to realize their creative talents. And now, with the development of AI, there's much more optimism about AI in China than in the West. For the first time, that vision seems somewhat realistic. Maybe not in ten years, but maybe in thirty.

Maybe advanced machinery in the form of superintelligent AI would do the socially necessary work. Then humans would be free to realize their creative talents, as Marx would want, and they'd also have more time, as Confucians would want, to nourish humane and harmonious relationships, starting with family and extending to friends, neighbors, fellow citizens, animals, and the environment. So that's the optimistic route. But for that to happen, I think three conditions have to be met. And here again, I'm treading on sensitive territory. The first is that the next generation of leaders won't have gone through the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution was a terrible time in Chinese history, certainly for intellectuals. Those who went through it really saw the worst of human nature, and that shaped their outlook. They became very paranoid and security-conscious, averse to openness, taking risks, and engaging with the rest of the world. And to a certain extent, that's what you have now. The next generation—basically, almost anyone under 60 in China now—favors more openness. Whether they're Confucians or Marxists or liberals or Taoists, the next generation will be much more open-minded. But second, the international system has to change. The U.S. is still trying to restrict China's development, you know, and not just in high tech. It's trying to keep China down more generally.

I mean, that will naturally strengthen the security apparatus rather than the reformers who favor a more open political system. Yeah. But if the U.S. were to say, "Let's cooperate on common problems, you know, whether it's rogue AI, nuclear weapons, or global pandemics. And let's forget about the rest of the stuff. It's not so important. These global challenges, of course, we need to work on them." If more, let's say, reasonable leaders emerge in the U.S., then China's leaders can relax a bit and focus on the more optimistic scenarios I described, where machines would do the socially necessary work and people would be free to realize their creative talents and nourish humane and harmonious social relationships.

Finally, to go back to the anti-corruption campaign, it has to move away from these harsh methods, which make public officials ultra-conservative and risk-averse. They also create a lot of enemies in the political system, because once you take down one person, you know, there are five or six people under them who also see their prospects for promotion evaporate. That's not healthy. So there has to be a transition from a more Legalist-style anti-corruption campaign to a more Confucian-style one. If those three things happen, then I think we can allow ourselves to think about more optimistic scenarios for the future.

#Glenn

I do think that perhaps the development of technology won't just change China. I think it'll change the whole world, obviously. But it appears to be breaking capitalism to some extent, whether you think that's a good thing or a bad thing. Since the Industrial Revolution, the balance we've struck between capital and labor has been a defining feature of capitalism. Now, as we see not just a concentration of power and capital but also capital essentially being able to replace labor, a lot of the foundations of capitalism seem to be weakening. And you have people like Yanis Varoufakis, who talks about cloud capitalism or technofeudalism.

And again, I don't have the answers to any of this. I don't pretend to. But we'll probably have to return to ideological discussions if capitalism, which really took shape in the 19th century, doesn't hold up in the face of current technologies. And again, that's something very different from Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis. What I find interesting about Marxism in China, though, is that Marxism often sees the past as baggage that slows you down.

In other words, you should be free of your traditions and almost free of history. But you get the impression that in China, they recognize that when you're standing in the middle of a storm, with the world changing so fast because of globalization, technological change, and domestic developments, you kind of need history as an anchor. It gives you something to hold on to so you can withstand those changes. Having those roots helps you stay resilient and adapt. I mean, these are very nationalist, conservative ideas, which seem to go against the leftist ideology of Marxism. Sorry, I didn't mean to go in this direction. I was just wondering what your thoughts were on this.

#Daniel Bell

I think that's exactly right. And now one of the official slogans in Chinese is "liang ge jiehe," which means we need to combine the Marxist tradition with the best of our cultural traditions. As you say, we need a sense of rootedness. And where is that going to come from? Mainly from Confucianism, but also from Taoism and Buddhism to a certain extent. Confucianism is really at the core. So the key question for China's future is how to combine this Confucian emphasis on rootedness and on family and social relationships as the key to a good life with this Marxist emphasis on having machines do the socially necessary work so that people are free to realize their creative talents. That' s going to be the key for China.

So it goes way beyond this idea of capitalism. I don't mean to sound like a flaming Marxist, but the key issue here is really who controls the capital, right? Who controls this advanced AI? In China, ultimately, the government has the power to influence the companies developing it and try to make sure it's developed in the public interest. In the U.S., it seems very difficult for the government to exercise that kind of control. Well, of course, we're seeing some very interesting things with Nvidia now. But the point is that China is still Marxist in the sense that the state has more power to control capital and try to make sure it serves the interests of the people rather than those of a tiny minority of capitalists.

#Glenn

Like I said, the old Marxist idea that workers should seize the means of production means something very different in the age of tech and AI. Anyway, thank you so much for taking the time. And for our listeners, please make sure to check out the book, *Why Ancient Chinese Political Thought Matters*. We'll leave a link so you can buy it. Thank you so much for your time, Professor.

#Daniel Bell

Thank you, Professor Diesen, for the great discussion. Thank you.