

# Will Confucius Marry Marx? The Quest for Legitimacy in Chinese Politics

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Chinese scholar [Lanxin Xiang](#) has written a book, [The Quest for Legitimacy in Chinese Politics](#), that is arguably the most extraordinary effort in decades trying to bridge the East-West politico-historical divide.

It's impossible in a brief column to do justice to the relevance of the discussions this book inspires. Here we will highlight some of the key issues - hoping they will appeal to an informed readership especially across the Beltway, now convulsed by varying degrees of Sinophobia.

Xiang delves right into the fundamental contradiction: China is widely accused by the West of lack of democratic legitimacy exactly as it enjoys a four-decade, sustainable, history-making economic boom.

He identifies two key sources for the Chinese problem:

“On the one hand, there is the project of cultural restoration through which Chinese leader Xi Jinping attempts to restore ‘Confucian legitimacy’ or the traditional ‘Mandate of Heaven’; on the other hand, Xi refuses to start any political reforms, because it is his top priority to preserve the existing political system, i.e., a ruling system derived mainly from an alien source, Bolshevik Russia.”

Ay, there's the rub: “The two objectives are totally incompatible”.

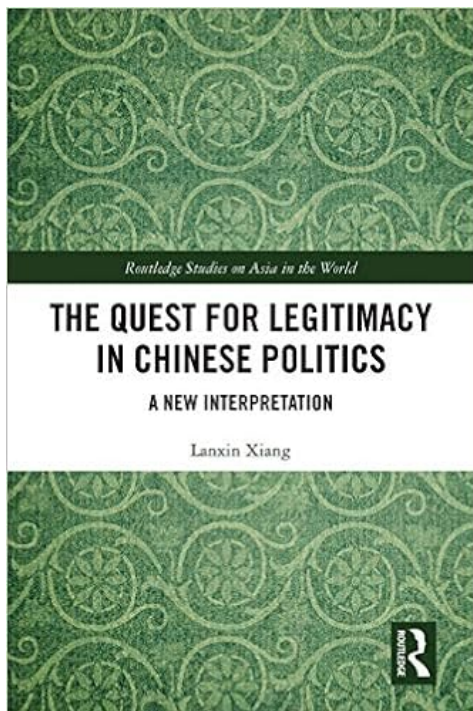
Xiang contends that for the majority of Chinese - the apparatus and the population at large - this “alien system” cannot be preserved forever, especially now that a cultural revival focuses on the Chinese Dream.

Needless to add, scholarship in the West is missing the plot completely - because of the insistence on interpreting China under Western political science and “Eurocentric historiography”. What Xiang attempts in his book is to “navigate carefully the conceptual and logical traps created by post-Enlightenment terminologies”.

Thus his emphasis on deconstructing “master keywords” - a wonderful concept straight out of ideography. The four master keywords are legitimacy, republic, economy and foreign policy. This volume concentrates on legitimacy (*hefa*, in Chinese).

**When law is about morality**

It's a joy to follow how Xiang debunks **Max Weber** - "the original thinker of the question of political legitimacy". Weber is blasted for his "rather perfunctory study of the Confucian system". He insisted that Confucianism - emphasizing only equality, harmony, decency, virtue and pacifism - could not possibly develop a competitive capitalist spirit.



Xiang shows how since the beginning of the Greco-Roman tradition, politics was always about a *spatial* conception - as reflected in *polis* (a city or city-state). The Confucian concept of politics, on the other hand, is "entirely temporal, based on the dynamic idea that legitimacy is determined by a ruler's daily moral behavior."

Xiang shows how *hefa* contains in fact two concepts: "fit" and "law" - with "law" giving priority to morality.

In China, the legitimacy of a ruler is derived from a Mandate of Heaven (*Tian Ming*). Unjust rulers inevitably lose the mandate - and the right to rule. This, argues Xiang, is "a dynamic 'deeds-based' rather than 'procedure-based' argument."

Essentially, the Mandate of Heaven is "an ancient Chinese belief that *tian* [ heaven, but not the Christian heaven, complete with an omniscient God] grants the emperor the right to rule based on their moral quality and ability to govern well and fairly."

The beauty of it is that the mandate does not require a divine connection or noble bloodline, and has no time limit. Chinese scholars have always interpreted the mandate as a way to fight abuse of power.

The overall crucial point is that, unlike in the West, the Chinese view of history is cyclical, not linear: "Legitimacy is in fact a never-ending process of moral self-adjustment."

Xiang then compares it with the Western understanding of legitimacy. He refers to Locke, for whom political legitimacy derives from explicit and implicit popular consent of the governed. The difference is that without institutionalized religion, as in Christianity, the Chinese created "a dynamic conception of legitimacy through the secular authority of

general will of the populace, arriving at this idea without the help of any *fictional* political theory such as divine rights of humanity and 'social contract'".

Xiang cannot but remind us that Leibniz described it as "Chinese natal theology", which happened not to clash with the basic tenets of Christianity.

Xiang also explains how the Mandate of Heaven has nothing to do with Empire: "Acquiring overseas territories for population resettlement never occurred in Chinese history, and it does little to enhance legitimacy of the ruler."

In the end it was the Enlightenment, mostly because of Montesquieu, that started to dismiss the Mandate of Heaven as "nothing but apology for 'Oriental Despotism'". Xiang notes how "pre-modern Europe's rich interactions with the non-Western world" were "deliberately ignored by post-Enlightenment historians."

Which brings us to a bitter irony: "While modern 'democratic legitimacy' as a concept can only work with the act of delegitimizing other types of political system, the Mandate of Heaven never contains an element of disparaging other models of governance." So much for "the end of history."

### **Why no Industrial Revolution?**

Xiang asks a fundamental question: "Is China's success indebted more to the West-led world economic system or to its own cultural resources?"

And then he proceeds to meticulously debunk the myth that economic growth is only possible under Western liberal democracy - a heritage, once again, of the Enlightenment, which ruled that Confucianism was not up to the task.

We already had an inkling that was not the case with the ascension of the East Asian tigers - Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea - in the 1980s and 1990s. That even moved a bunch of social scientists and historians to admit that Confucianism could be a stimulus to economic growth.

Yet they only focused on the surface, the alleged "core" Confucian values of hard work and thrift, argues Xiang: "The real 'core' value, the Confucian vision of state and its relations to economy, is often neglected."

Virtually everyone in the West, apart from a few non-Eurocentric scholars, completely ignores that China was the world's dominant economic superpower from the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Xiang reminds us that a market economy - including private ownership, free land transactions, and highly specialized mobile labor - was established in China as early as in 300 B.C. Moreover, "as early as in the Ming dynasty, China had acquired all the major elements that were essential for the British Industrial Revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century."

Which brings us to a persistent historical enigma: why the Industrial Revolution did not start in China?

Xiang turns the question upside down: "Why traditional China needed an industrial

revolution at all?"

Once again, Xiang reminds us that the "Chinese economic model was very influential during the early period of the Enlightenment. Confucian economic thinking was introduced by the Jesuits to Europe, and some Chinese ideas such as the *laisser-faire* principle led to free-trade philosophy."

Xiang shows not only how external economic relations were not important for Chinese politics and economy but also that "the traditional Chinese view of state is against the basic rationale of the industrial revolution, for its mass production method is aimed at conquering not just the domestic market but outside territories."

Xiang also shows how the ideological foundation for Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* began to veer towards individualist liberalism while "Confucius never wavered from a position against individualism, for the role of the economy is to 'enrich people' as a whole, not specific individuals."

All that leads to the fact that "in modern economics, the genuine conversation between the West and China hardly exists from the outset, since the post-Enlightenment West has been absolutely confident about its sole possession of the 'universal truth' and secret in economic development, which allegedly has been denied to the rest of the world."

An extra clue can be found when we see what 'economy' (*jingji*) means in China: *Jingji* is "an abbreviate term of two characters describing neither pure economic nor even commercial activities. It simply means 'managing everyday life of the society and providing sufficient resources for the state'. In this conception, politics and economy can never be separated into two mechanical spheres. The *body politic* and the *body economic* are organically connected."

And that's why external trade, even when China was very active in the Ancient Silk Road, "was never considered capable of playing a key role for the health of the overall economy and the well-being of the people."

### **Wu Wei and the invisible hand**

Xiang needs to go back to the basics: the West did not invent the free market. The *laisser-faire* principle was first conceptualized by Francois Quesnay, the forerunner of Adam Smith's "invisible hand". Quesnay, curiously, was known at the time as the "European Confucius".

In *Le Despotisme de la Chine* (1767), written 9 years before *The Wealth of Nations*, Quesnay was frankly in favor of the meritocratic concept of giving political power to scholars and praised the "enlightened" Chinese imperial system.

An extra delicious historical irony is that *laisser-faire*, as Xiang reminds us, was directly inspired by the Taoist concept of *wu wei* - which we may loosely translate as "non-action".

Xiang notes how "Adam Smith, deeply influenced by Quesnay whom he had met in Paris for learning this *laisser-faire* philosophy, may have got right the meaning of *wu wei* with his invention of "invisible hand", suggesting a proactive rather than passive economic system, and keeping the Christian theological dimension aside."

Xiang reviews everyone from Locke and Montesquieu to Stuart Mill, Hegel and Wallerstein's

“world system” theory to arrive at a startling conclusion: “The conception of China as a typical ‘backward’ economic model was a 20<sup>th</sup> century invention built upon the imagination of Western cultural and racial superiority, rather than historical reality.”

Moreover, the idea of ‘backward-looking’ was actually not established in Europe until the French revolution: “Before that, the concept of ‘revolution’ had always retained a dimension of cyclical, rather than ‘progressive’ – i.e., linear, historical perspective. The original meaning of revolution (from the Latin word *revolutio*, a “turn-around”) contains no element of social progress, for it refers to a fundamental change in political power or organizational structures that takes place when the population rises up in revolt against the current authorities.”

### **Will Confucius marry Marx?**

And that brings us to post-modern China. Xiang stress how a popular consensus in China is that the Communist Party is “neither Marxist nor capitalist, and its moral standard has little to do with the Confucian value system”. Consequently, the Mandate of Heaven is “seriously damaged”.

The problem is that “marrying Marxism and Confucianism is too dangerous”.

Xiang identifies the fundamental flaw of the Chinese wealth distribution “in a system that guarantees a structural process of unfair (and illegal) wealth transfer, from the people who contribute labor to the production of wealth to the people who do not.”

He argues that, “deviation from Confucian traditional values explains the roots of the income distribution problem in China better than the Weberian theories which tried to establish a clear linkage between democracy and fair income distribution”.

### **So what is to be done?**

Xiang is extremely critical of how the West approached China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “through the path of Westphalian power politics and the show of violence and Western military superiority.”

Well, we all know how it backfired. It led to a genuine modern revolution – and Maoism. The problem, as Xiang interprets it, is that the revolution “transformed the traditional Confucian society of peace and harmony into a virulent Westphalian state.”

So only through a social revolution inspired by October 1917 the Chinese state “began the real process of approaching the West” and what we all define as “modernization”. What would Deng say?

Xiang argues that the current Chinese hybrid system, “dominated by a cancerous alien organ of Russian Bolshevism, is not sustainable without drastic reforms to create a pluralist republican system. Yet these reforms should not be conditioned upon eliminating traditional political values.”

So is the CCP capable of successfully merging Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism? Forging a unique, Chinese, Third Way? That’s not only the major theme for Xiang’s subsequent books: that’s a question for the ages.

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