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Virtuous Governance and the Chinese Way

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Abstract

Lucian W. Pye, the renowned American Sinologist, argues that power/authority in Chinese culture follows a paternalistic structure, that the distinction in Chinese society between public and private has historically been in a state of tension, and therefore that Chinese governance has always emphasized central power over local self-governance, suppressed cultural pluralism, and rebuffed multipolar structures of power. Even though the inherent tension identified by Pye certainly exists, the thesis that Chinese culture has a deeply ingrained authoritarian orientation is simply incorrect. In order to resolve the tension between the public and private realms, Chinese thinkers—from the various strands of legalist thought to the Confucian notion of “kingly governance”—have premised the division of power on the priority of preserving centralized power. In other words, diffusion of power has been premised on the idea of an already collectivized authority. Therefore, the power structure that defines Chinese culture has certainly not been the polycentric one that Pye implicitly values, but neither has it been the centralist, authoritarian structure that he abhors. Rather, it has been the Confucian model premised on the values of governance through ritual and moral virtue. Insights from cultural psychology help explain ethical governance—that is, rule by an ethical meritocracy—in Chinese society and culture.

Keywords

Lucian W. Pye – public-private divide – power structures

This paper takes a culturalist approach to the understanding of ideas about power structures in Chinese culture and history. This way of thinking is tied

to my long-held belief that we need to recognize the existence of multiple modernities and a multicultural world. Furthermore, I also believe that it is impossible to understand a country's system of governance, in particular its power structures, without taking into consideration its cultural and historical background. Based on these assumptions, we can analyze the power structures inherent in Chinese culture and understand the possible future orientations of the Chinese sociopolitical system.

1 Lucian Pye and Chinese Governance

Lucian W. Pye [1921-2008], was one of the most authoritative American scholars on Chinese culture. In his book *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*, he posited that the Chinese political structure is fundamentally paternalistic.¹ In his model, the Chinese structure of authority is associated with the following:

1. Omnipotence—In the eyes of the Chinese people, the thesis goes, the ideal is that there is nothing the ultimate political authority cannot accomplish and that the ultimate goal of the sovereign power is the resolution of all social issues. In this model, the central authority orders not only society but also the entire universe. It is profoundly different from the division of power in the modern West, where each locus of authority is responsible for the resolution of issues within its domain: political issues should be resolved within politics, religious matters within the Church, and legal disputes within an independent judiciary. According to Pye, in the Chinese model, in contrast, all these different aspects of power coalesce into the same authority.²
2. Centralization—The Chinese, Pye argues, accept from a young age a centralized power structure and therefore cannot tolerate the contemporaneous existence of multiple centers of power because multiplicity breeds factionalism. Indeed, this kind of reasoning has been combined with nationalism to strengthen its manifestation and render power ever more centralized. Japan's long-standing feudal system and its family-based social structure made the Japanese more tolerant of the idea of multiple centers of power. Therefore, centralization is a distinctive

1 Lucian W. Pye and Mary W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 186, 198-200.

2 *Ibid.*, 43-45, 49, 183-84.

- feature of Chinese politics and one of the primary reasons that democratic principles have not been able to develop in China.³
3. Ideology—The Chinese traditionally put an excessive amount of effort into proving certain ideological and moralistic tenets. The lack of emphasis on the concrete and particular dimensions of the political process lead to the nonpractical nature of Chinese politics. Although in the West, Pye argues, utility, benefit, and the expression of the individual became the principal goals of the political process, Chinese politics retained a deep disjunction between theory and practice.⁴
 4. Rule by Moral Example—Contrary to Western conceptions of power based on the utilitarian pursuit of benefit, traditional notions of power in China promoted the idea that authority was derived from the inherent ethical capabilities of individuals.⁵ In Western culture, the ideal leader combines strength, resolve in making decisions, and an openness to criticism. In Asia, however, the ideal ruler is benevolent, understanding, and morally superior, as defined by a spirit of self-sacrifice.⁶ Pye further argues that the Chinese model of politics constitutes a “virtuocracy,” in which rule by moral example is fundamentally opposed to the political process because decision-making is not premised on the principle of the election of leaders or selection policies.⁷ Instead, the Chinese political model is defined by personalization, thus weakening institutionalized governance. Pye concludes that this element of personalized politics defines almost all contemporary Asian political systems—Japan being the notable exception—which explains the weak and unstable electoral processes in Asian democracies.⁸
 5. *Guanxi* (i.e., personal connections)—Pye’s identification of the significance of personal relationships rests on the claim that the Chinese have historically had little faith in—and, indeed, experience with—power as exercised in the public domain. Chinese history has always overly emphasized the power of personal ties in the sociopolitical realm and this accounts for the ebb and flow of national and factional interests over time.⁹ However, the most significant difference between China and Japan is that the Japanese not only valued and relied on personal ties in the

3 Ibid., 183-91.

4 Ibid., 186-87, 204-9.

5 Ibid., 49-50.

6 Ibid., 28.

7 Ibid., 42.

8 Ibid., 23.

9 Ibid., 190.

public sphere but also openly acknowledged their significance [*on-giri*], publicly promulgating personal relationships as the foundation of political action. In China, however, informal modes of the operations of power were at play, in the absence of a principled structure. Of course, this does not mean that personal relationships were not used in the advancement of personal interests in China.¹⁰

6. The anti-political nature of Chinese politics—The claim here is that Chinese politics regards ideological issues as more significant than the political process of deliberation. Thus, politics in premodern China: (1) did not emphasize the rationalization of the political process but, rather, its moralization; (2) did not doubt the significance of personal sacrifice as a fundamental political value; (3) valued centralized authority and viewed with apprehension the division of power, stifling political pluralism and creativity; and (4) in the absence of political competition, succeeded in cultivating a sense of fear about the expression of criticism. Pye further points out that, generally speaking, Western thinkers understand power as participation in the decision-making process, whereas political consciousness in Asia equated power with being spared the burden of making decisions. Westerners see political participation as a prerequisite to human fulfillment, whereas Asians regard decision-making as an inherently risky enterprise. The essence of power and of being in power is not to decide but, rather, to attain a feeling of safety. This was the reason that Chinese emperors were so rigidly tied to a strict schedule of ritual obligations.¹¹

2 The China Model Revisited

Ultimately, Pye falls back on cultural relativism and opposes any meaningful critique of the Asian model of power as inferior or less advanced—a point that he makes abundantly clear. In discussing the Chinese government's efforts to push ahead with new modernization policies, he points out: "The reason why the results of these reforms have not been impressive is that they have not touched the key hierarchical relationships or the cultural attitudes about power and action."¹² Such reforms made people feel less safe and spurred them to seek further protection in personal relationships. Pye criticizes the

¹⁰ Ibid., 190-91, 291-99.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

¹² Ibid., 210.

ideological cornerstone of Zhao Ziyang's reforms because, according to him, it is simply inconceivable for Chinese leaders to believe that diversity and a pluralistic power structure can accelerate modernization.¹³ His criticism includes figures such as Sun Yat-sen, Chang Kai-shek, and Mao Zedong and their internal "revolutions," which only sought to strengthen personalized power but not institutional authority.¹⁴ Furthermore, Pye argues that if Deng Xiaoping's reforms exhibited a principle of multiplicity—that is, a recognition that different localities have different interests and priorities—this would constitute a true revolution because it would challenge the hierarchical power structure that has dictated Chinese politics. If Deng's reforms are successful, Pye concludes, they would have an impact far greater than any of Mao's revolutionary actions.¹⁵

Following Pye's line of reasoning, the question boils down to whether the Chinese conception of power/authority has to be abandoned in order to achieve true modernization. My answer to this question is that it does not.

Pye's description of the Chinese power structure as "paternalistic" is indeed correct. However, Pye is mistaken in claiming that the Chinese are inculcated from a young age—whether in the family or the classroom—with fear of challenging authority. This is simply not the case. I have repeatedly stressed in previous writings that traditional Chinese values do not posit an absolute hierarchical division and do not call for unconditional support of sons toward fathers, wives toward husbands, and the population toward its rulers. Quite the opposite: from Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, and other pre-Qin Confucian thinkers to Han dynasty [202 BCE–220] scholars such as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, Ban Gu 班固, and Liu Xiang 劉向, all the way down to the Cheng brothers 二程, Zhu Xi 朱熹 and the great Confucians of the Ming [1368–1644] and Qing [1644–1912] dynasties—they all placed great value on criticizing and admonishing the political elite, elevating such action to the level of a moral imperative.¹⁶ This attitude can be further attested by the historical account of the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露, which shows the extent to which the ancient Chinese were unafraid of criticizing political authority. Indeed, precisely because authority was never made absolute in Chinese history, it has been easy for the Chinese to

13 Ibid., 189.

14 Ibid., 189–90.

15 Ibid., 191.

16 Fang Zhaohui 方朝暉, "'Sangang' zhende shi zaopo ma? Chongxin shenshi 'sangang' de lishi yu xianshi yiyi '三綱'真的是糟粕嗎? 重新審視'三綱'的歷史與現實意義 [Are 'Sangang' Really Feudal Leftovers?]," *Tianjin shehui kexue* 天津社會科學, 2 (2011); idem, "Shi shui wujie le sangang-dafu Li Cunshan jiaoshou 是誰誤解了三綱—答覆李存山教授 [Who Misunderstood the 'Sangang']," *Zhanlue yu guanli* 戰略與管理 5/6 (2012).

overthrow or bring down existing political structures. If my position is indeed correct, then it would disprove Pye's main argument.

Thus, we come to the question of whether the Chinese political equation has division of power.¹⁷ Pye stresses many times over that the key problem in Chinese politics is that it never valued the multiplicity of power, and therefore competition, rationalization, and, ultimately, modernization could never really take hold. Perhaps, this view comes from an incomplete, or even misguided, understanding of Chinese history. Over the millennia of Chinese history, politics has always been dominated by the issue of the division and consolidation of power, the interplay between the central authority and peripheral centers of power. From the feudal system of the Western Zhou [1046-771 BCE] to the Warring States period [475-221 BCE], this has repeatedly manifested itself in violent ways, as the division of power brought about war. Similar periods of disunity, disruption, and war recurred time and again in Chinese history, strengthening the quest for peace and stability. For this reason, the idea of a unified political ruler in China coheres with the patterns of change in Chinese history. Also for this reason, division of power as a means of attaining multiplicity and multiculturalism never came to be primary political objectives.

Thus, how does unified political rule affect the diffusion of power? Pye's outlook on diffused power is primarily concerned with local autonomy and cultural pluralism. Using local records from townships and county-level schools, scholars such as de Bary and Bol have shown the extent to which local societies in premodern China exhibited a high degree of self-determination. Similarly, Rankin, Rowe, Wakeman, Shils, and Xu Yinshi, among many others, have shown in great detail the existence and extent of a private economy in premodern China. Indeed, from the Song dynasty [960-1279] onward, the development of regional cultures in China is almost an obvious fact—something repeatedly stressed in Japanese scholarship. The biggest issue I take with Pye's analysis is that it lacks a robust understanding of Chinese history. Instead, his presentation of China is anachronistic, because he tries to explain China's current political situation by referring to Chinese culture overtime. But even if one accepts that Chinese culture has an inherent trajectory—as I do—Pye fails to take into consideration the fact that modern China is the product of thousands of years of culture in a violent clash with the modern West: the modern Chinese political predicament is an unresolved clash of values. What the current political reality shows is the effect of China's having been pushed off its traditional cultural trajectory.

17 Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, 189.

We have to realize that if China were a federalist state like the US—that is, if it had a strong sense of division of power—then it is indeed quite likely that separatist forces, local warlords, and disunity would arise—as they have repeatedly done throughout Chinese history. One of the main ideas in political Confucian texts is that a completely independent and self-governing province simply does not work. The reason traditional Chinese thinkers were highly suspicious of the effects of dividing power is that, following the patterns of change in Chinese history, disunity has always brought war. In this light, then, Taiwan's model of democratic governance, which has overwhelmingly modeled itself after the American system, constitutes a strong departure from the Confucian ethos and marks a strong historical break. Of course, these points are all perfectly consistent with the cultural relativist stance that Pye himself adopts.¹⁸

If Pye's paternalistic model of authority is, indeed, an accurate description of Chinese politics, then it is definitely more complex than he is willing to recognize. This can be attributed to the fact that Pye—like all scholars—brings his own value system and implicit biases into his research, which leads him to commit two major errors. First, he has not acknowledged all the evidence that points to the fact that the premodern Chinese political system is not as centralized, authoritarian, and devoid of rationality as he has made it out to be. Second, he has not acknowledged that the Chinese conception of the centralization and division of power—including the relationship between the center and peripheries, state and society, the central government and local rule—has been formed through historical experience, defined by its own model of rationalization, and that this historical experience is simply distinct from Euro-American history. In the next section, we explore Pye's claims about Chinese power further from a culturalist perspective.

3 Centralized Power Revisited

Pye holds that the reason centralized power has been emphasized in Chinese politics is that China has historically been faced with a paradox owing to opposition between the private and public realms. The most classic manifestation of this is the clash between the center and the peripheries, the state and different groups of individuals (including families, religious groups, associations). Devolution of power to the peripheries leads to regionalism, and diffusion of power to organizations leads to factionalism. I follow Fei Xiaotong 費孝通, Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, Xu Langguang [徐琅光 Francis L.K. Hsu], He

¹⁸ Ibid., 28.

Youhui [何友暉 David Y.F. Ho], Huang Guangguo [黃光國 Hwang Kwang-kuo], 濱口惠俊 [Hamaguchi Eshun], Huang Meihui [黃美惠 Mayfair Mei-hui Yang], Andrew Kipnis, and Richard Nisbett among others and take Chinese culture as profoundly “relational”:

The Chinese cultural model can be summed up as a way of thinking and a mode of living that is defined by mutual dependency, assistance, and imitation premised on intrapersonal affection and understanding. And it is on the basis of mutual dependence on one another as well as on the environment that a feeling of personal security is sought after. I call this feature the “relations standard” of Chinese culture and it is an aspect of the psychological structure of Chinese culture.¹⁹

Beginning in the 1970s, scholars such as Hofstede²⁰ and Triandis²¹ have researched from various perspectives the polarity between the individual and the collective and have identified that the distinction between the “self” and the “other” is a defining trait of all collectivist cultures—that is, a clear distinction between the in-group and the out-group. Brewer and Chen have conducted a robust overview on the scholarship on collectivism,²² which I have used to craft this simple chart:

TABLE 1 Three types of cultures

Individual	Relationship	Collective
Independent self	Relational self	Collectivist self
Individualism	Relationship-based collectivism	Communitarian collectivism

19 Fang Zhaohui, *Wenming de huimie yu xinsheng: ruxue yu zhongguoxiandaixing yanjiu* 文明的毀滅與新生: 儒學與中國現代性研究 [*The death and Rebirth of Civilization*] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2011), 86.

20 Geert H. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*, abr. ed. (Newbury Park: Sage, 1980/1984).

21 Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism & Collectivism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

22 Marilynn B. Brewer and Ya-Ru Chen, “Where (Who) Are Collectivism? Toward Conceptual Clarification of Individualism and Collectivism,” *Psychological Review*, 114, no. 1(2007): 133-151.

In this spectrum ranging from individual to collective, East Asian cultures fall on the collectivist end because they are ultimately based on a web of intra-personal relations. Societies that are primarily individualistic, no doubt, also exhibit aspects of collectivist cultures and, in some cases, to the point that some elements of collectivism are stronger in such societies than in East Asian ones. From my own research, I regard Chinese culture as “relationship-based collectivist” society.

Now we can analyze, from the standpoint of social psychology, why Chinese culture requires unified central power. The most important reason is that in Chinese history regionalism and factionalism—periods when division and separation of power prevailed—have never been able to preserve security and social order. Instead, such periods have been marked by conflict and violence. The quest for political unity in China has generally been defined by the fact that the majority of the Chinese belong to the same ethnic group, bound by a common writing system, way of living, and set of beliefs, without exerting strong pressure on minorities to assimilate. To understand this point, we need to review Pye’s distinction between the Chinese and Japanese conceptions of relationships (*guanxi* versus *on-giri*). According to Pye, interpersonal hierarchical relations in Japan are premised on the feelings of guilt and shame. The externalization and formalization of these emotional states gives private relations public recognition, and the political process in Japan is premised on such public affirmation of interpersonal relations. In China, however, private relations beyond the family are relatively weak, circumstantial, and malleable. Relations in China have been and still are fundamentally private and personal affairs that lack the potential for formalized public expression and recognition. As such, personal relations historically have not acted—and, in principle, cannot act—as the foundation of political behavior and action, as they have in Japan.

The question, of course, persists: Is there not a better alternative to the preservation of centralized power? Part of the answer lies in recognizing that some form of centralized authority will always be necessary because a factionalist or regionalist conflict by definition requires a higher power (either one of the factions or an external power) to act as the final arbitrator. This historical precedent has impelled Chinese political thinkers to walk from disunity to unity.

Pye’s criticism of *guanxi* and centralized authority suffers from one major misconception. According to Pye, a centralized authority can only be the product of the suppression of local governance and civil society, as well as opposition to multiculturalism. However, this merely represents the model of accumulating power proposed by the traditional Legalist school in antiquity and does not correspond to the predominant historical reality in China. As

the main sociopolitical ideology, Confucianism has always advocated a different model in which the public domain does not dominate the private domain. Rather, Confucianism's internal logic consists in the recognition that the fierce struggle between the public and the private realms is the result of a failure to uphold social justice and value local priorities. If a sense of justice prevails in society and local voices are heard, then the clash between the public and the private is significantly mitigated, to the point that it ceases to be the fundamental polarity in society and politics. Indeed, if such conditions are met, not only will centralized authority not be harmed but it will gain legitimacy and strength. This is why Confucius says: "If the people of distant regions are not obedient, then civility and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so";²³ similarly, Mencius states: "a government based on benevolence will make the officers of the world aspire to serve in your [Majesty's] court, the farmers wish to plough your fields, the merchants desire to store their goods in your markets, travellers wish to use your roads, and all throughout the world who feel aggrieved by their rulers wish to come and complain to you."²⁴ Therefore, "using virtue to rule over people," "using goodness to cultivate people," and the idea that "the benevolent does not have enemies"²⁵ point to the political ideal of kingly rule. These sayings help us understand how—based on the theoretical precondition of justified centralized authority—the resolution between the public and the private can be achieved. This is the main reason Confucius compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and all subsequent Confucian scholars in Chinese history have stressed the significance of ethical governance as a fundamental political ideal. And even if it has not always been achieved, Chinese political history has been invariably affected by this ideal.

Thus, why is it that in such a society—as Chinese society has historically been—wealth is distributed equitably, privileges are restrained, the people's needs are met, local self-governance is strong, and public-private tensions can be resolved?

The reason people form groups is that they seek a sense of security. If the political structure in force is unjust, people will feel the need to protect themselves against threats the central governing body is failing to address or to protect themselves against the political structure itself. When public authority is fair, however, the feeling of security it can afford to the population is far

23 *Analects*—Jishi. 論語·季氏. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 [Translation and Commentary on Analects] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2002), 172.

24 *Mencius*—Lianghuiwang shang. 孟子·梁惠王上. Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注 [Translation and Commentary on Mencius] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2003), 17.

25 *Mencius*—Gongsun chou. 孟子·公孫丑下. *Ibid.*, 86.

greater than the feeling of security afforded by any small individual group, simply because the power of the state is far greater than that of any particular group. Finally, individual organizations are defined by relations that are ultimately at odds with the general public interest because they prioritize the interests of the particular group over the interests of the general public. Thus even if particular groups can provide a sense of security, their inherent opposition to the public interest makes its members feel insecure. This is the outcome of factionalism because it lacks a great ethical or, indeed, psychological foundation.

If my theory stands up to scrutiny, it shows not only that Pye's thesis is misguided but also that it is possible for China to create a model of political authority based on mutual reliance between the public and the private—a model that is profoundly different from the Western one.

4 Omnipotent Political Rule

Let us revisit Pye's theory of the Asian "omnipotent political authority." In Western culture, the division between politics and education is one of the cornerstones of modernity, on which the separation of state and society, politics and administration, ethics and law, are established. The Asian model of an omnipotent ruler is indeed profoundly different from the Western model. However, it makes sense that such an ideal was sought.

Judging from social psychology, the thesis of "omnipotent political authority" coheres rather well with Chinese psychosocial mechanisms. The Chinese way of thinking is defined by a strong sense of holism and collectivism as well as an orientation for affairs of "this world" and not a metaphysical or spiritual "otherworld." This way of thinking is manifested in the Chinese tendency to rely on and seek safety from the collective that exists in the present world and not in any another world (e.g., a Christian afterlife). Therefore, Chinese politics has predominantly stressed the significance of ideology to define the self based on the whole and to implement specific policies only after the successful establishment of ideology. Finally the dominant tendency in Chinese politics is to view the political process as a mechanism for solving the problems of the whole and not merely those of one of its parts.

The reason holism emerged in China is related to the this-worldly orientation of the Chinese—unlike the Christian orientation toward an afterlife. The traditional conception of life after death was that people existed as ghosts and spirits, not in a different world or plane of existence but, rather, in the same world as the living. Indeed, the this-worldly orientation in Chinese thinking is

so strong that belief in immortality in the form of a celestial being who lived within the bounds of this world was at times incredibly strong. If we compare these beliefs with the Christian or Hindu belief systems, then we can see that the Chinese orientation has an incredibly strong focus on the present world and not an afterlife. Using the rubric of modern Western philosophy, these beliefs exist within the bounds of the “visible world.” Of course, Chinese thought also had its own “metaphysics” that was rather similar to the Platonic idea of an “intelligible world”; however Chinese metaphysics is significantly different because it does not espouse a transcendental idealism or the possibility of pure existence of the soul or of any other kind of metaphysical object.

The focus on the present world has been the guiding force behind some key concepts in Chinese thought: the unity and harmony of nature and man and the holistic reasoning in Chinese philosophy. Because it lacked a belief that life after death was on a different existential plane, it has always emphasized making the present world safe and secure for all. Thus, it should not be a big surprise that an almost mystical quality was attributed to the collective because, as we have seen, the collective is the most successful medium for attaining security and order.

But what is the effect of a this-worldly orientation? People do not aim to transcend or reject the present world, so they are urged to become part of one body because it is in unity with all others that security can be attained. A this-worldly orientation, coupled with holistic thinking, helps explain why the highest authority has to be singular, indivisible, and, of course, omnipotent. Centralization of power, then, is motivated by a quest to avoid disruption and fragmentation and to provide a sense of security.

In *Geography of Thought*, Richard Nisbett, a cultural psychologist, conducts several experiments to demonstrate that East Asians have a holistic way of thinking.²⁶ Xu Langguang's *The Americans and the Chinese* analyzes the Chinese situational way of thinking: a relational way of thinking in which the individual seeks to understand and acquire a sense of safety through his/her relationship to the context.²⁷ In this lies the holistic way of thinking. Sun Longji's analysis of the underlying structure of Chinese culture shows that its conception of man is radically different from the Western one.²⁸ In China,

26 Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 89-90, 99, 142-43.

27 Francis L.K. Hsu, *The Americans and the Chinese: Reflections on Two Cultures and Their People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Natural History Press, 1970).

28 Sun Longji 孫隆基, *Zhongguo wenhua de shenceng jiegou* 中國文化的深層結構 [*The Deeper Structure of Chinese Culture*] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004).

humanity has traditionally been understood as the unity of the body and the “heart-mind” whereas, in the West, human beings are regarded as the unity of body and soul. In the Western conception, the individual is in a framework of values that prioritizes independence, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law—only in this broader framework of values can the Western notion of the individual be established. But the Chinese conception of human life, which prioritizes a feeling of security, is premised not on the idea of independence but, rather, on participation in social relations. This participation in the world gives rise to the impetus that the unity between the body and “heart-mind,” the self and the other, humanity and nature is essential in the quest for security.

These psychological studies help us understand why the ideal political structure in China is omnipotent: its purpose is to satisfy the inherent need to feel safe, and to do so it needs maximal power. Is it possible to have a world where power is diffused to different authorities as relegated by the different loci of the present world? Of course, it is possible, but doing so in the Chinese context would require starting from the assumption of trying to preserve “a great unity” of power. In other words, only through an omnipotent authority can the Chinese derive a sense of security, and only an omnipotent authority can successfully cohere with this fundamental need in Chinese psychology.

5 Becoming Ideological

Pye stresses repeatedly that political speeches by several Asian leaders are not intimately tied to policy formation but, rather, have a strong symbolic function. This kind of political behavior often entails an element of deception because the purpose of the speech is to augment the leader’s power and is devoid of any specific political meaning. Pye seemingly argues that the ideological transformation of Asian politics is the embodiment of the nonpolitical nature of politics. That is because the main focus is not the most important realms of the political process—policy formation, decision-making, effectiveness, and feedback mechanisms—but, rather, nonconcrete actions and behaviors. Pye holds an implicitly negative outlook on this issue. However, if we acknowledge as sheer fact the reality that some cultures, such as the Chinese, regard relationships as their fundamental building block and the feeling of security as the utmost political priority, then we might not take such a negative stance. That is because the role of relationships in Chinese culture leads to another major trait: its affective response.

In their experiments, Nisbett and Taka Masuda discovered that Asians have a more heightened sense of other people's emotional states than Americans.²⁹ Leung and Bond have further shown that, Chinese are more influenced than Americans by personal relations in the distribution of resources.³⁰ In a culture with a heightened sense of interpersonal sensitivity, harmony and solidarity receive more attention, and an equal distribution of resources is more important than a fair distribution (i.e., one in which each gets as much as they produce). At the same time, the principle of fairness is favored in cultures that focus on productivity, competition, and personal achievement.³¹ Therefore, interpersonal sensitivity is particularly high in Chinese culture, and this, in turn, makes people want to imitate one another, giving rise to the affective "response" of Chinese culture. This is expressed in the *Analects*: "The relation between the morally superior and petty people is like that between wind and grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it." Confucius' point here is typical of a broad feature of Chinese politics. Confucius identifies social change with a change in norms and argues that norms can be changed most effectively by changing the ethos of the highest political authority. This is indeed an archetypal mode of governance in Chinese politics, in which the ideal political structure takes full note of this sociopolitical imperative and employs all the means at its disposal to enact it.

In previous scholarship, I examined the crisis of the model of Chinese academia through the significance of social norms in Chinese governance as expressed in the *Classic of Poetry*.³² From a political science perspective, norms are effectively related to the orientation of the human mind: when the mind is focused on the same unified purpose, it can form unified strength, resulting in great political effectiveness. This kind of unity of mind across people is often expressed in the adaptation of norms. If people's minds are not unified, not only will there not be a strong motivation to action but, more crucially, the possibility that part of the population will act as a hindrance is high. This is the reason that, throughout Chinese history, the completion of many major political projects was premised on public sentiment—a feature, of course,

29 Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought*, 60.

30 Kwok Leung and Michael H. Bond, "The Impact of Cultural Collectivism on Reward Allocation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47, no. 4 (1984): 793.

31 Michael H. Bond, Kwok Leung, and Kwok Choi Wan, "How Does Cultural Collectivism Operate? The Impact of Task and Maintenance Contributions on Reward Distribution," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 13, no. 2 (1982).

32 Fang Zhaohui, "Cong 'Maoshi' fengjiao kan zhongguo yanjiu de fanshi weiji 從<毛詩>風教看中國研究的範式危機 [Recognizing a Paradigm Crisis by Analyzing Research on the Feng Poems of the Book of Odes]," *Guoxue xinshiyue* 國學新視野 3 (2012): 55-70.

not unique to Chinese history. Returning to Pye's position on Asian leaders' speeches, it could be that Asian politicians wish to test the public's response to their speeches and gauge popular sentiment on key political issues. Therefore, even if such speeches may not appear to be political, it is mistaken to label them as "lacking a political nature," for they are inherently interested in consolidating specific sociopolitical norms. Moreover, the primary role of ideology in Chinese culture is the unification and stimulation of the human "heart-mind" as a catalytic agent of political will.

If the moralizing ideological turn in Chinese and Asian politics is not a manifestation of the non- or anti-political nature of politics, as Pye argues, then the question becomes: how do these societies find an ideological orientation? Actually, this is not a hard question to answer, for, in ancient China, Confucianism provided an answer to the ideological issue that cohered with Chinese norms and customs. Of course, during different periods premodern China had different ideological orientations: in the Warring States period, the "hundred schools" were in contention, in the Wei-Jin era [220-420] religious Daoism emerged, in the Tang [618-907] and Yuan [1271-1368] dynasties Buddhism flourished, and in the Han, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties Confucianism was held in high regard. This very cursory overview of Chinese intellectual history simply shows that the dominant ideological orientation in Chinese history has not been unequivocal over time. However, from a more macroscopic perspective, Chinese culture beginning in the Western Zhou has regarded Confucianism as its dominant ideology, regardless of the fact that other intellectual trends have taken hold. In the modern era, Chinese culture has been faced with profound challenges, and the faith of intellectuals and the people in Confucianism and Chinese culture has been unprecedentedly shaken. Thus modern China is faced not with the issue as identified by Pye—how Chinese politics can move away from a moralizing ideology—but, rather, with which ideological orientation best fits China. The multiplicity of answers to this question in the past century is the real crux of the matter, and Pye's concerns with the separation of power and pluralism are wholly external to the Chinese discourse and historical development.

6 Is Ethical Governance the Way to Rule?

Western theorists are particularly fixated on the question of how the central authority can be checked to ensure that it is on the right path of governance. If the central authority is unjust, corrupt, and self-interested, what mechanism is

there to correct it? In short, what is the corrective mechanism in the Chinese political domain?

First, we have to recognize that this question is often posed based on the assumption that the Western political system—with its emphasis on constitutionalism, rule of law, and democracy—is indeed the best system for controlling the ultimate authority. However, scholars such as Pye have long ignored this fact: in a culture defined by relationships, the ultimate political authority is also bounded by a specific controlling mechanism. It is just radically different from the one found in the West and therefore hard to recognize as such. Over China's thousand-year history, the highest political authority has been checked by the imperative to rule with ritual and virtue.

Pye's analysis of governance through ethical virtue—what he calls a “virtuocracy”—is rule by virtuous men and rule by moral example.³³ He takes this to embody a unique feature of the Asian conception of power/authority. Only through recognition of moral talents that the people obey can the central authority attain legitimate power.³⁴ Pye presents ethical rule as a conceptualization of power that is inherently antithetical to politics, because it does not see utility and efficacy as the key political targets. Thus, reconsidering the aforementioned tension between the private and the public domains, we can appreciate how governance based on ethical virtue is one of the primary mechanisms for resolving this tension.

In his book, Pye analyzes Pakistan, Indonesia, and other Asian countries that, since their independence, have fervently tried to incorporate systems of political authority from the modern West in their effort to establish their own modern states. The experiences in these countries included chaos, military juntas, separatist movements, and many other negative outcomes. The ultimate reason for the impossibility of applying Western paradigms of power in Asia is, according to Pye, Asians' conception of political authority, which is fundamentally paternalistic.

However, the paternalistic model has at least two variations in Chinese history: the Legalist model and the Confucian model. The ideal of authority for Legalists is “charismatic leadership” (i.e., granted as a gift—*charisma*—from a supernatural power), whereas the Confucian ideal is a virtuous authority, that is, governance based on ethical rule. We know that Confucianism places particular emphasis on “ruling by virtue”³⁵ and that “leading/instructing with

33 Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, 42, 200.

34 *Ibid.*, 42, 48–50.

35 *Analects*—Wei zheng. 論語·為政. Yang Bojun, *Lunyu yizhu*, 11.

virtue brings peace.”³⁶ Beginning with the *Book of Documents* [*Shangshu* 尚書], Chinese culture has had a very clear orientation toward ethical governance, because one of the results of the “relationship standard” is that people occupying high positions of authority set an example for others to follow. In the words of Confucius, only through virtue can one rectify oneself, and after having rectified oneself will the people follow “like they follow the northern star.”³⁷ This can also be seen in the *Mencius*: “With a just ruler, the state is stable”;³⁸ and the “Great Learning [*Daxue* 大學] chapter in the *Book of Rites* [*Liji* 禮記]: “When the sovereign treats the old as the old ought to be treated, the people become filial; when the sovereign treats his elders as the elders ought to be treated, the people develop brotherly submission; when the sovereign treats compassionately the destitute, the people do the same.” The Confucian canon is filled with similar sayings. But why is ethical governance necessary? One could say that the “relationship standard” in Chinese culture has brought about this effective conception of authority and has defined the necessity for ethical governance.

Therefore, in a society that places great value on interpersonal bonds, the key political issue is how to ensure that individuals of the highest talent—and not institutions—retain the highest decision-making power. That is why the phrase that a ruler ought to “use people in ruling people” from the Golden Mean [*Zhongyong* 中庸] chapter in the *Book of Rites* became the paramount political model in Chinese history. This model is ubiquitous in Confucian thought.

Can “using people to rule people” limit a violent and mercurial autocrat? Looking at Chinese history, we can see that Chinese social structure has been premised on some rationalizing assumptions. The ancient dynasties in China were subject to the limitations of any monarchical system, but after years of exploration, the system of selecting and appointing officials based on examinations was developed, which meant that it could not be manipulated by the will of a few. From the Han dynasty selection process, to the Tang and Song formal examination system onward, this model of governance represents the political practice and structure in premodern China.

If we follow Pye’s agreement with Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict in taking a cultural relativist turn,³⁹ and if we agree with the idea that “different

36 *Guanzi*—Mu min. 管子•牧民. Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, *Ershier zi* 二十二子 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 92.

37 *Analects*—Wei zheng. Yang Bojun, *Lunyu yizhu*, 11.

38 *Mencius*—Lilou shang. 孟子•離婁上. Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu*, 180.

39 Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, 28.

cultures produce different norms and customs and therefore different modernizations,⁴⁰ then we cannot maintain an ultimately positive or negative attitude toward the Chinese model of authority. We have to realize that the inherent cultural patterns of a given group determine its internal tensions and contradictions as well as the models and mechanisms through which these tensions are resolved. Based on this point, then, the statement that Chinese politics is inherently “anti-political” cannot be established—rather, the ethical dimension of Chinese politics represents the model of political governance in China.

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40 Ibid., 13.

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