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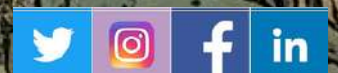
ISSUE BRIEF

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# THE PHILOSOPHICAL STATE: CONFUCIANISM, TAOISM, AND BUDDHISM AS INSTRUMENTS OF GOVERNANCE

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**The Philosophical State:  
Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism  
as Instruments of Governance**



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"A state is not legitimated by its power alone, but by the philosophical tradition that power learns to speak."

- Adapted from Wang Hui, *The Politics of Imagining Asia*

### **Introduction: Philosophy as Political Technology**

The study of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideological architecture has long been dominated by a focus on Marxist-Leninist foundations, the history<sup>1</sup> of revolutionary struggle, and the mechanics of Party organisation. This framing, though analytically useful, risks obscuring a more persistent and arguably more consequential dimension of Chinese political thought, the deliberate instrumentalisation of classical philosophy as a mechanism of state governance. In contemporary China, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are not merely artefacts of a civilisational<sup>2</sup> past that the Party tolerates for cultural reasons. They are, with increasing explicitness under Xi Jinping, active resources of political legitimation, institutional design, and social management.

The CCP's relationship with classical Chinese philosophy constitutes what may be termed a political technology, a set of conceptual tools and normative vocabularies through which the state structures authority, manages dissent, and produces social consent. This claim

departs from both the hagiographic tradition within Chinese state discourse, which celebrates philosophical revival as cultural renaissance, and the reductive dismissal within some Western scholarship, which treats the Party's philosophical rhetoric as mere instrumentalism or propaganda. The reality is considerably more complex: classical traditions are selectively refracted, creatively reinterpreted, and institutionally embedded in ways that render them genuinely constitutive of the contemporary Chinese state's self-understanding and its governance practices.

### **Philosophy and Power: The Long History of Instrumental Classicism**

The instrumentalisation of classical philosophy by Chinese political authorities <sup>3</sup>is not an invention of the CCP. It constitutes, rather, a defining feature of Chinese statecraft stretching across more than two millennia. The Han dynasty's selective adoption of Confucianism as state orthodoxy under Emperor Wu in the second century BCE established the foundational template: a classical tradition would be institutionalised, its texts canonised, its examinations made the gateway to bureaucratic power, and its vocabulary deployed to legitimise dynastic rule. The philosopher-official, the ruler, was simultaneously an intellectual, an administrator, and a servant of the state, and this fusion was not accidental. It reflected the Han state's recognition that durable governance required not merely coercive capacity but normative authority, the ability to make subjects internalise the justice of the existing order.

This tradition of what Daniel Bell <sup>4</sup>has called 'political Confucianism' persisted, with modifications, through the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties. The imperial examination system, in its full elaboration under the Song, enshrined the Confucian canon as the sole legitimate intellectual framework for political service, producing over centuries a bureaucratic class whose identity was constituted through deep immersion in classical texts. The result was not mere ideological conformity but a shared language of governance, a common set of concepts, analogies, and normative commitments through which officials understood their roles, justified their decisions, and negotiated political conflicts.

The Maoist period represented a radical rupture with this tradition. The May Fourth <sup>5</sup>Movement's condemnation of Confucianism as the philosophical backbone of feudal

hierarchy and imperialist subordination was carried forward by the CCP into active cultural-political policy. The Cultural Revolution's assault on the 'Four Olds' old culture, old customs, old habits, old ideas was, in significant measure, an assault on the classical philosophical inheritance. Temples were destroyed, classical texts burned, and teachers of traditional learning subjected to public humiliation<sup>6</sup>. The violence of this rupture was itself a kind of evidence of the tradition's power: one destroys thoroughly only that which one fears.

The rehabilitation of classical philosophy began gradually under Deng Xiaoping and accelerated markedly under Hu Jintao's 'harmonious society' <sup>7</sup>programme and Xi Jinping's subsequent construction of the 'China Dream.' This rehabilitation was not a straightforward restoration. It was, and continues to be, a process of selective reappropriation of identification within the philosophical traditions of those elements consonant with Party governance and severing them from those potentially destabilising to it. Understanding this selective logic is essential to understanding how classical philosophy functions in contemporary Chinese politics.

### **Confucian Hierarchy and the Architecture of the Party-State**

- **The Ethics of Hierarchical Relation**

At the core of Confucian political philosophy lies the concept of the five relationships (wulun), ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend. Of these, four are explicitly hierarchical, premised on the idea that social order inheres in the proper performance of asymmetric roles. The ruler governs justly; the minister serves loyally. The father nurtures; the son obeys. This is not mere submission: Confucianism insists equally on the obligations of superiors, most famously in the concept of ren (benevolence), which demands that those in power exercise their authority with moral seriousness and genuine concern for those beneath them.

The CCP's organisational culture draws deeply, if not always explicitly, on this Confucian structure of hierarchical relation. The internal discipline of the Party, its emphasis on loyalty to the leadership, the culture of criticism and self-criticism, and

the expectation of deference within the nomenklatura system reproduces in recognisable form the Confucian ethics of the minister-ruler relationship. When President Xi Jinping speaks of the need for Party members to maintain 'absolute loyalty' (juedui zhongcheng) to the Central Committee and to Xi himself, he is deploying a vocabulary whose resonances in Chinese political culture are unmistakably Confucian, whatever the Leninist institutional framework within which it operates.

The concept of zhengming, the rectification of names, is another Confucian tool that has found renewed application under President Xi. Confucius famously argued that governance begins with ensuring that names accurately correspond to the realities they designate: that ministers who do not fulfil their roles should not be called ministers, that rulers who do not rule justly should not bear the title of ruler. The CCP's persistent attention to ideological naming, its insistence on the precise formulation of its governing slogans, and the careful management of how policies are labelled and conceptualised are a contemporary variant of this philosophical preoccupation. The formal inscription of 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics <sup>8</sup>for a New Era' into the Party constitution represents zhengming writ large: an act of naming that simultaneously describes and consolidates a political reality.

- **Meritocracy and the Legitimation of Elite Rule**

Confucian political philosophy offers the CCP a second invaluable resource: a sophisticated theory of political meritocracy that legitimises elite governance without recourse to democratic popular mandate. The Confucian tradition <sup>9</sup>holds that governance properly belongs to those who have cultivated virtue and knowledge, the junzi, or exemplary person through study and moral self-cultivation. This was institutionalised in the imperial examination system as a mechanism for selecting officials based on demonstrated intellectual and moral merit rather than hereditary privilege alone.

The CCP has adapted this meritocratic logic to justify its monopoly on political power. In the writings of Party theorists and in the speeches of President Xi Jinping, the Party is constructed not merely as a revolutionary vanguard in the Leninist sense but as a meritocratic elite that has earned its leadership through demonstrated competence, self-sacrifice, and moral seriousness. The system of cadre evaluation, the promotion ladders within the Party-state apparatus, and the emphasis on educational credentialism in leadership selection all reflect the practical institutionalisation of this neo-Confucian meritocratic logic. Daniel Bell and others have argued that this represents a genuine alternative to Western liberal democracy, not authoritarian rule masquerading as philosophy, but a coherent political theory grounded in the Confucian conviction that good governance requires good governors, not merely responsive ones.

Whether or not one accepts this argument at face value, its political function is clear: Confucian meritocracy allows the Party to respond to demands for political accountability without conceding the principle of competitive electoral democracy. Accountability, in this framework, runs upward through the Party hierarchy and is enforced through internal discipline mechanisms, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection being the contemporary equivalent of the imperial censorate rather than downward through popular sovereignty. The philosophical tradition provides a normative vocabulary that makes this institutional arrangement legible and defensible within Chinese cultural terms.

- **The Family-State Analogy and Affective Legitimation**

Perhaps the most politically potent Confucian concept deployed by the contemporary Chinese state is the analogy between the family and the state, the idea that political loyalty is properly understood as an extension of filial piety (xiao). In Confucian thought, the family is the primary school of political virtue: the child who honours and obeys loving parents is preparing herself, through that very practice, for the role of loyal subject and responsible citizen. The state, on this

view, is a kind of enlarged family, and the ruler a kind of father whose authority is legitimate precisely because it is exercised in the interest of those he governs.

The CCP's construction of President Xi Jinping as a paternal figure, the ubiquitous 'Uncle Xi' (Xi Dada<sup>10</sup>) imagery in official media, and the affective language of care and protection in political communication consciously exploits this Confucian family-state logic. Citizens are invited to relate to the Party-state not merely as subjects of political authority but as members of a political family, bound by ties of affection, reciprocal obligation, and shared identity. This affective legitimation strategy is considerably more durable than purely rational-legal legitimation, because it taps into the deepest registers of moral psychology and personal identity.

### **Taoist Pragmatism and the Art of Adaptive Governance**

- **Wu Wei and the Strategy of Non-Intervention**

If Confucianism provides the CCP with a theory of hierarchical order and moral authority, Taoism contributes a quite different but complementary political resource: a philosophy of adaptive, minimally-coercive governance grounded in attunement to circumstance and the strategic deployment of apparent inaction. The Taoist concept of wu wei often translated as 'non-action' or 'effortless action' does not mean passivity. It means acting in harmony with the natural dynamics of a situation rather than imposing a predetermined plan upon it. The sage ruler, in the Taoist conception, governs most effectively when governance is least visible; the state functions best when subjects are hardly aware of being governed at all.

The political application of wu wei is most clearly visible in the CCP's approach to economic governance. The 'reform and opening up' (gaige kaifang) strategy inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping was, in significant measure, a Taoist political move: rather than imposing a rigid ideological blueprint, the Party permitted and even encouraged organic economic experimentation at the local level, incorporating successful experiments into national policy through a process Deng famously

described as 'crossing the river by feeling for the stones.' This was not ideological abandonment but strategic adaptability, a *wu wei*<sup>11</sup> approach to economic governance that allowed the Party to capture the energies of market forces without surrendering political control.

The same logic applies to the Party's management of civil society. Rather than crushing all non-state social organisation, which would require massive coercive expenditure and generate significant resistance, the Chinese state under the post-Mao leadership has pursued a strategy of selective incorporation, co-optation, and boundary management. Civil society organisations are permitted to operate in domains the state finds non-threatening or useful (environmental monitoring, social welfare provision, certain kinds of cultural production), while being strictly constrained in politically sensitive areas. This calibrated approach reflects a Taoist political intuition: excessive force is self-defeating; sustainable governance works with social energies rather than against them.

- **Zhongyong: The Doctrine of the Mean and Political Flexibility**

The Confucian-Taoist concept of *zhongyong*<sup>12</sup>, the doctrine of the mean, or centrality and constancy, is a further philosophical resource that informs Chinese political practice in ways that have received insufficient scholarly attention. *Zhongyong* does not counsel mere moderation or compromise; it describes the capacity to locate, in any situation, the precise disposition that is neither excessive nor deficient, neither too firm nor too yielding. Applied to governance, it describes a political artistry that avoids dogmatic rigidity on one hand and unprincipled opportunism on the other.

The CCP's foreign policy discourse, particularly the concept of 'strategic patience' and the consistent insistence on 'peaceful development' even while pursuing assertive territorial and economic strategies, reflects this *zhongyong* sensibility. China presents itself, in its official self-understanding, as a power that neither seeks hegemony (the excess of overreach) nor passively accepts subordination

(the deficiency of timidity). The philosophical vocabulary of centrality and balance invoked repeatedly in official discourse on China's international role naturalises what is in practice a highly calculated and often aggressive foreign policy stance within a framework of classical philosophical virtue.

- **Taoism and the Governance of Information**

A third dimension of Taoist political thought with direct contemporary relevance concerns the governance of knowledge and information. The Lao Tzu<sup>13</sup>, Tao Te Ching contains numerous passages suggesting that social harmony is best maintained when people are not overstimulated by competing information and desires: 'Fill their bellies, empty their minds.' This has been interpreted in various ways, but in its political application, it offers a philosophical legitimation for information management, the idea that a well-governed polity is one in which the flow of knowledge is shaped by those who understand the larger patterns of social harmony rather than left to the undifferentiated cacophony of unrestricted expression.

The Great Firewall<sup>14</sup> and the broader apparatus of Chinese internet governance cannot be understood solely as instruments of political repression, though they certainly function as such. They are also embedded in a philosophical tradition, however selectively appropriated that attributes positive social value to the shaping and management of information flows. When Chinese authorities describe their internet governance policies in terms of 'clean' cyberspace (qinglang) and 'orderly' information environment, they are drawing on a Taoist-inflected vocabulary of cleanliness, order, and harmony that gives coercive information control a normative gloss drawing on deep cultural resources.

## **Buddhism, Social Harmony, and the Management of the Periphery**

- **The CCP's Buddhist Turn**

Buddhism occupies a more complex and, in some ways, more contested position in the CCP's philosophical repertoire than either Confucianism or Taoism. The

Party's fraught relationship with Tibetan Buddhism, including the ongoing dispute over reincarnation<sup>15</sup> authority and the Dalai Lama succession question, illustrates the limits of the state's ability to instrumentalise a tradition whose institutional autonomy it simultaneously fears. Nevertheless, Buddhism<sup>16</sup> has been progressively incorporated into the CCP's governing framework, particularly since the early 2000s, as a resource for constructing social harmony, managing minority communities, and projecting a particular image of China's civilisational character internationally.

The concept of 'harmonious society' (hexie shehui), formally adopted under Hu Jintao in 2004, drew extensively on Buddhist vocabulary and concepts. The term hexie itself has deep resonances in both Confucian and Buddhist thought, but it was the Buddhist inflection with its emphasis on the cessation of conflict through individual transformation, the cultivation of compassion (bei) and equanimity (ping), and the recognition of interconnectedness (yuanqi) that gave the concept its distinctive affective quality.<sup>6</sup> Social harmony, in this framing, is not merely the absence of visible conflict but a positive state of social well-being produced through the cultivation of appropriate mental and moral dispositions in citizens.

- **Buddhism and the Governance of Ethnic Minorities**

The political deployment of Buddhism is most strategically significant in the governance of China's ethnically and religiously distinct peripheral territories, Tibet and, to a lesser extent, the Buddhist communities of Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, and parts of Xinjiang. In Tibet, the CCP has pursued a dual strategy: on one hand, aggressively constraining the political authority of the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, including through its assertion of the state's right to confirm reincarnations of senior lamas; on the other hand, investing in the restoration of certain monasteries, the training of 'patriotic' clergy<sup>17</sup>, and the promotion of a state-approved version of Tibetan Buddhist practice that foregrounds the tradition's spiritual and cultural dimensions while excising its claims to political autonomy.

This strategy reflects a sophisticated understanding of Buddhism's social function in Tibetan society. The monastery (gompa) has historically served not merely as a site of religious practice but as a centre of community life, education, dispute resolution, and identity formation. By co-opting rather than simply destroying these institutions, the approach of the Cultural Revolution period, the post-1980 CCP has sought to redirect their social energies toward state-sanctioned ends. 'Patriotic education' <sup>18</sup>campaigns in Tibetan monasteries, which require monks and nuns to study Party history, denounce the Dalai Lama, and affirm their loyalty to the People's Republic of China (PRC), represent the institutional expression of this co-optation strategy.

The Dalai Lama succession question is, in this context, not merely a dispute about religious procedure. It is a contest over the ultimate source of authority within Tibetan Buddhism and therefore over the philosophical-institutional framework through which the CCP can or cannot claim legitimate governance over the Tibetan plateau. Beijing's insistence on its right, under the 1793 Qing-era 'Golden Urn' <sup>19</sup>lottery system, to confirm reincarnations is simultaneously a claim to continuity with the Qing imperial tradition, an assertion of state sovereignty over religious institutions, and a recognition that whoever controls the succession controls the most powerful legitimating institution in Tibetan society.

- **Buddhist Soft Power in China's International Projection**

Beyond its domestic governance functions, Buddhism has been increasingly deployed as an instrument of Chinese soft power <sup>20</sup>in international relations, particularly in Southeast and South Asia. The revival of the 'Buddhist Silk Road' <sup>21</sup>narrative, the idea that Buddhism provides a historical basis for benign Chinese cultural influence across Asia, serves China's foreign policy interests by presenting Chinese civilisational presence in the region as spiritually and culturally enriching rather than geopolitically threatening. State-sponsored initiatives such as the World Buddhist Forum, held in China since 2006, have provided platforms for Chinese Buddhist organisations to cultivate relationships with Buddhist

communities across Asia, including in countries where Chinese political influence is otherwise contested.

This Buddhist diplomacy is not without its contradictions. China's repression of Tibetan Buddhism, its severe restrictions on Falun Gong (which draws on Buddhist and Taoist elements), and its treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang sit uneasily with its international projection of itself as a civilisation that respects and nurtures spiritual traditions. The gap between the domestic instrumentalisation of Buddhism and its international valorisation reflects the selective, compartmentalised nature of the CCP's engagement with classical philosophy more broadly.

### **Xi Jinping's Philosophical Synthesis: Classical Thought and the China Dream**

The preceding sections have traced the distinct contributions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism to the CCP's governance framework. Under President Xi Jinping, these distinct contributions have been woven into a more deliberate and systematic ideological synthesis, consciously positioned as the philosophical foundation of what Xi calls the 'China Dream' <sup>22</sup>(Zhongguo Meng) of national rejuvenation. This synthesis represents a qualitative shift from the more pragmatic, piecemeal appropriations of classical thought that characterised the Deng and Jiang eras.

Xi's speech at the International Confucius Cultural Festival in 2014, his address at a symposium on the works of Confucius and Confucianism, and his repeated references to classical texts in major political speeches, the Tao Te Ching, the Analects, Mencius, and the Ching signal a systematic effort to reground CCP governance in classical philosophical authority. This is not mere cultural decoration. It represents a recognition, at the highest level of the Party, that Marxist-Leninist legitimacy is insufficient for the social conditions of contemporary China, a society increasingly educated, prosperous, and in search of sources of meaning and identity that transcend the revolutionary narratives of the twentieth century.

The philosophical synthesis Xi has pursued operates on three levels. At the ontological level, it asserts the existence of a continuous and distinctive Chinese civilisational essence (Zhonghua wenming) that connects the present Chinese state to five thousand

years of philosophical and cultural development. At the normative level, it claims that this civilisational essence contains resources of governance wisdom, the Confucian ethic of benevolent hierarchy, the Taoist art of adaptive rule, and the Buddhist cultivation of social harmony superior to, or at least not inferior to, the liberal democratic framework associated with Western modernity. At the political level, it uses this civilisational claim to justify the CCP's governance model as not merely pragmatically effective but philosophically legitimate rooted in the deepest sources of Chinese cultural identity and therefore appropriately expressive of Chinese sovereign self-determination.

This synthesis is not without internal tensions. Confucian remonstrance traditions the insistence that officials have not merely the right but the duty to criticise rulers who, sit uneasily with the demand for absolute loyalty to Xi's leadership. Taoist scepticism about concentrated power and the virtue of minimally intrusive governance conflicts with the direction of Xi's institutional reforms, which have markedly centralised authority in the person of the General Secretary. Buddhist traditions of monastic autonomy and the transcendence of political authority stand in tension with the state's comprehensive regulatory control over religious institutions.

These tensions are not resolved; they are managed through selective citation, creative reinterpretation, and the authoritative weight of state institutions that can shape which readings of classical texts become publicly dominant. This is, in the end, the defining characteristic of the CCP's philosophical politics: not fidelity to tradition but mastery of it, the capacity to mobilise classical resources in the service of contemporary power while suppressing the dimensions of those traditions that might empower resistance or limit authority.

The political effectiveness of this strategy should not be underestimated. Survey evidence and ethnographic research consistently indicate that significant segments of the Chinese population find the classical philosophical revival not merely ideologically convenient but genuinely meaningful, such that the invocation of Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist concepts resonates with deeply held values and provides a sense of cultural continuity and national dignity that neither Maoist ideology nor market triumphalism alone could supply. The CCP's philosophical politics works, to the extent that it does, because it is not

purely manufactured: it taps into real cultural resources and genuine popular attachments, even as it shapes and constrains how those attachments are expressed and institutionalised.

### **Conclusion: The Philosophical State and Its Discontents**

The Chinese Communist Party's engagement with classical philosophical traditions for years has constituted a political technology of considerable sophistication and historical depth. Confucian hierarchy structures the Party's institutional design and legitimises its meritocratic claims. Taoist pragmatism underwrites its adaptive governance strategies and its management of information and civil society. Buddhism provides resources for constructing social harmony, managing peripheral communities, and projecting civilisational soft power internationally. Under President Xi Jinping, these distinct contributions have been synthesised into a more systematic ideological programme that grounds the Party's legitimacy in the claim to represent the culmination of five thousand years of Chinese philosophical development.

This analysis has several implications for how we understand authoritarian resilience in contemporary China. First, it suggests that the CCP's durability cannot be explained solely by reference to coercive capacity, economic performance, or nationalist mobilisation, as all of these are significant. The Party also draws on deep philosophical resources that give its rule a normative dimension, a capacity to present itself not merely as powerful and effective but as right. Second, it illustrates the way in which classical traditions can be simultaneously authentic and instrumental, genuinely rooted in cultural inheritance while being deployed in the service of particular political interests. Third, it raises important comparative questions about the relationship between philosophical tradition and political legitimacy that extend well beyond the Chinese case.

The philosophical state has been characterised it, is a state that governs not only through law, coercion, and institutional procedure but through the active cultivation of a philosophical vocabulary that structures how citizens understand authority, obligation, and social order. In this respect, contemporary China under Xi Jinping represents not an anomaly in the history of political philosophy but its continuation as a civilisation that has never entirely separated the art of governance from the question of the good life, and that

continues, with all the complexities and contradictions that imply, to insist on its inseparability.

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