

Social Engineering of Confucianism and Legalism

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- 1 Confucianism has profoundly shaped China’s political and legal systems, leading to specific characteristics and challenges. A review of the Great Qing Legal Code, translated into English in 1810, noted China’s lack of civil law focus and predominant use of criminal law, which even treated civil disputes as criminal cases. This reflects three core Confucian principles in Chinese governance: the unity of ethics and politics, a strict hierarchical system, and an emphasis on obedience.**

Firstly, Confucianism promotes the unity of ethics and politics. From the Han Dynasty onward, filial piety was extended to state governance under the principle of “cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world.” This established a system of patriarchal autocracy, suited to the stable social structure of the time.

Secondly, Confucian thought upholds a rigid hierarchy, with each social role strictly defined, reinforcing a system where individuals were expected to adhere to unchangeable roles. In contrast, Western models, like England’s Magna Carta, established rights and freedoms outside of strict hierarchy. Confucianism, however, justified this top-down structure, leaving little room for individual autonomy.

Lastly, obedience is central to Confucian political thought, where respect for fate, elders, and the words of sages is paramount. Confucian norms for both state and social behavior are the Three Bonds and Six Relations—key concepts that prioritize obedience to authority. This framework influenced subsequent legal codes from the Tang to Qing dynasties, establishing tiered punishments

based on social rank and familial ties, further embedding obedience and hierarchy as cultural and legal norms in Chinese society.

“Use Buddhism to cultivate the heart, Daoism to nurture the body, and Confucianism to govern the world.” This saying clearly articulates the distinct social role that Confucianism occupies within traditional Chinese culture. Throughout more than two thousand years of Chinese feudal society, Confucian thought held the orthodox position within official ideology, exerting a broad and profound influence on the culture of Chinese governance and scholarship. “A traditional Chinese society centered on Confucianism is imbued with an Apollonian spirit—a society structured to cycle and continue in ecological harmony, inheriting the traditions of ancestors and passing them down through generations.” Tradition is authority, with an emphasis on preservation, a pursuit of stability, and a fear of change.

In *The Book of Documents*, “The Instructions of Da Yu” reads: “The Supreme Heaven bestows its mandate, holding all lands under heaven as one dominion for the ruler.” This conveys the idea that “all under heaven belongs to the king, and all subjects owe their allegiance to him.” The content intended to serve rulers includes: (1) the concept of the mandate of heaven, (2) the ideal of unification, and (3) the ethical codes of hierarchy and moral obligations. In *The Book of Documents*, it says, “Alas! Heaven has created people with desires; without a ruler, there is chaos. Heaven has also endowed certain individuals with wisdom to govern.” In *Xunzi*, “The System of Kings,” it states, “Heaven and earth give birth to the noble man, who in turn brings order to heaven and earth.” Thus, the heavenly mandate, the ideal of unification, and the hierarchical ethics become a “three-in-one” concept.

As the saying goes, “For two thousand years there has been no new thought—not for lack of thought, but because Confucius’s thought is seen as thought; for two thousand years there has been no new right or wrong—not because there is no sense of right or wrong, but because Confucius’s judgment is considered the standard.” Ultimately, it is not because the Chinese people have a particular fondness for Confucius’s teachings, but because Chinese social governance has a particular need for Confucian thought.

Since Confucianism was established as the orthodox doctrine by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty and his ministers, it has been deeply embedded in Chinese governance. Rooted in a land-based economy, land could be relatively freely bought and sold, and farmers had a certain degree of freedom to relocate. Even though Chinese society did not develop a hereditary aristocracy like the nobility of feudal Europe, it nevertheless achieved a similar effect by monopolizing knowledge, which gradually elevated the status of the scholar-official class, giving it a quasi-aristocratic character.

Through “governing society with Confucianism,” traditional Chinese culture found a more secure footing in the political sphere. “Culture is a combination of material means and various forms of knowledge; people use these tools and knowledge to survive, and with specific aims, they modify culture.” The relationship between Confucian scholars and political power was manifested fully in the Chinese feudal scholar-official class, and “governing society with Confucianism”

became the chosen method for successive rulers and traditional scholars.

As one scholar put it, “A society accepts the thoughts and actions of its intellectuals primarily because these intellectuals reflect general social views, merely articulating the ideas shaped by existing social facts more clearly and firmly.” From Confucius and Mencius to Dong Zhongshu’s “Divine Right of Kings” in the Western Han, the metaphysical reflections of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove in the Wei and Jin dynasties, Han Yu’s concept of the mandate of Heaven in the Tang Dynasty, Zhu Xi’s rationalism in the Song, Wang Yang-ming’s “School of the Mind” during the Ming, and various interpretations of Confucianism in the Ming and Qing periods—all of these demonstrate a continuous adaptation of Confucianism. This process of reshaping Confucian thought served to make it a tool for the ruling class to govern society and maintain their authority.

Culture belongs to the superstructure, with its core rooted in social ideology. Confucian culture aligns with the interests of the ruling class and reflects the “national character” across Chinese dynasties. Culture is national character, culture is national identity, and Chinese culture represents Chinese people. From a certain perspective, Confucian culture can even be seen as a system primarily designed to train bureaucrats for the state. Successive rulers openly embraced Confucian principles as foundational guidance for governance, making Confucian ideals the core of bureaucratic culture. Concepts like “valuing the virtuous and capable,” “the people as the foundation of the state,” “benevolent governance,” “honoring rites and upholding laws,” “economizing to enrich the people,” and “self-cultivation as fundamental” deeply influenced China’s bureaucratic system and monarchical rule. These elements embody the concept of “governing society through Confucianism” in traditional Chinese culture.

The reason Confucianism-centered Chinese culture has survived and developed over five thousand years lies in its core values, which possess the qualities of an advanced culture. Confucian culture’s focus on humaneness and emotional resonance gives it profound vitality and universality. Its enduring appeal, rooted in timeless, universal values, suggests that with the collective efforts of humanity, Confucianism and the traditional culture it represents will continue to radiate a bright future of hope, harmony, and spiritual illumination.

2 The ideological foundations and historical trajectories of Confucianism, Legalism, Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, and Xiism each have contributed to shaping China's path toward a centralized, totalitarian state. Although each of these ideologies originally arose with distinct motivations and goals, they share common threads of absolute authority, centralized control, and the imposition of state ideology over individual freedoms. Over time, their combined influence has engineered a system where totalitarianism flourishes, given the emphasis on uniformity, ideological conformity, and state supremacy.

1. Confucianism and Totalitarian Tendencies

Confucianism laid the groundwork for a society centered on hierarchical obedience and moral governance. Confucian ideals posited that harmony arises when individuals conform to their roles, with subjects being obedient to rulers, children to parents, and wives to husbands. This concept of “harmony through hierarchy” instilled a social order that minimized dissent. Confucian social engineering placed the emperor as the moral authority who, through the mandate of heaven, wielded near-absolute power. While Confucianism may not be a totalitarian ideology in the modern sense, its emphasis on obedience and centralized moral authority made it easier for subsequent rulers to adopt a top-down, autocratic style of governance.

Confucianism also promoted a system where civil service exams were used to select bureaucrats, creating a meritocratic elite loyal to the emperor. This institutionalized loyalty not only reinforced the ruling structure but normalized the notion that the ruler held both political and moral authority, a concept that evolved into greater state control over personal freedoms.

2. Legalism and the Rise of Autocratic Control

Legalism, which emerged during the Qin Dynasty, can be seen as an early form of totalitarian governance in China. Legalist thinkers like Han Feizi argued that people are inherently selfish and require strict laws, surveillance, and severe punishments to maintain order. Legalism pushed for absolute state power, where the ruler's will was law and individual autonomy was restricted. By implementing a draconian legal code and eliminating competing ideologies, Legalism established a highly centralized system where dissent was effectively quelled, and loyalty to the state was enforced through fear.

The totalitarian implications of Legalism were profound. It restructured

society so that everyone was monitored, with even minor transgressions being met with severe penalties. This created a culture of compliance and fear, which set a precedent for later totalitarian regimes in China. The authoritarian and punitive nature of Legalism facilitated a governance model in which citizens were conditioned to obey the state unquestioningly, laying the foundation for the absolute power structures seen in later dynasties and modern times.

3. Marxism: Centralized Authority in Revolutionary Terms

Marxism, adopted by China in the 20th century, provided a theoretical basis for class struggle and the elimination of private property. In theory, Marxism aimed to establish a classless, stateless society. However, in practice, it required a centralized authority to dismantle existing social and economic structures. Marxist principles were manipulated to justify the abolition of private property and the restructuring of society along collectivist lines, all controlled by the state.

Under Marxist-inspired policies, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sought to eradicate traditional social structures that it viewed as feudal or reactionary. This included the dismantling of religious institutions, family hierarchies, and other forms of association that could rival state authority. By enforcing Marxist ideology, the CCP exerted control over nearly every aspect of Chinese life, implementing policies that minimized personal freedoms and discouraged any form of independent thought or enterprise.

4. Leninism and the Vanguard Party

Leninism introduced the concept of a vanguard party, which asserted that a small, ideologically pure elite should control the state on behalf of the proletariat. Leninist principles justified a single-party state in which the CCP could maintain total control, ostensibly to guide society toward communism. However, this also allowed the CCP to monopolize political power, eliminate opposition, and suppress any alternative viewpoints. The CCP, as the sole vanguard party, became synonymous with the state itself.

This centralization of power created a government where dissent was not only discouraged but viewed as a threat to the socialist revolution. Through mechanisms of censorship, surveillance, and political purges, the CCP institutionalized a totalitarian state, where the party's directives were absolute, and any deviation was met with punishment. Leninist thought encouraged a single source of authority, creating a framework that reduced individual rights in favor of collective control by the party.

5. Maoism: Total Control through Continuous Revolution

Maoism intensified totalitarian control in China by advocating for continuous revolution to prevent the erosion of socialist ideals. Mao Zedong's campaigns, including the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, not only aimed to transform Chinese society but to enforce ideological purity by eradicating counter-revolutionary elements. Mao's policies engineered a system of surveillance, mutual monitoring, and fear, where neighbors were encouraged to report on each other, and political loyalty was often displayed through violent purges and public trials.

The Cultural Revolution, in particular, sought to eliminate the "Four Olds"

(old customs, old culture, old habits, old ideas), aiming to reshape Chinese society entirely. This campaign eliminated traditional intellectuals, religious figures, and anyone perceived as counter to Maoist thought. Maoism demanded conformity and was enforced by mass mobilization campaigns that instilled fear and obedience. The result was a society in which the state monitored every facet of life, from family relations to cultural practices, cementing a totalitarian system through ideological fanaticism.

6. Xiism: Modernizing Totalitarianism with Technology and Surveillance

Under Xi Jinping, the CCP has intensified totalitarian control using modern technology. Xi Jinping Thought, enshrined in the party constitution, emphasizes centralized leadership and strict party discipline, reinforcing the CCP's absolute authority over all aspects of Chinese life. Xi's administration has modernized totalitarianism by implementing a social credit system, extensive surveillance networks, and strict internet censorship, allowing the state to monitor citizens' behavior in unprecedented ways.

Xiism represents a fusion of traditional authoritarian methods with modern technology, achieving control through digital surveillance, artificial intelligence, and biometric data. This digital authoritarianism enables the CCP to monitor, influence, and restrict individuals' actions in real-time, making dissent nearly impossible. Through Xiism, the CCP has created a sophisticated system that controls both the physical and digital aspects of citizens' lives, reinforcing totalitarianism on a scale that was previously unachievable.

Conclusion: Convergence toward Totalitarianism

Each of these ideologies—Confucianism, Legalism, Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, and Xiism—has contributed distinct elements to the structure of governance in China. While Confucianism instilled a cultural acceptance of hierarchy and obedience, Legalism introduced the concept of state control through strict laws and punishments. Marxism and Leninism provided the ideological foundation for the single-party state, while Maoism intensified this with mass mobilization and ideological purges. Xiism has brought these totalitarian inclinations into the digital age, achieving unprecedented levels of state control over individual lives.

Together, these ideologies have created a system that perpetuates totalitarian rule by centralizing authority, enforcing ideological conformity, and suppressing any opposition. The CCP, through these ideological tools, has engineered a society in which the state holds supreme power, individual rights are subordinate, and dissent is actively discouraged or punished. By co-opting both traditional and modern methods of control, the Chinese government has effectively embedded totalitarianism within the fabric of Chinese society, making it resistant to change and firmly under the control of the ruling party.