**Intro to comparative politics - Final Exam**

**Instructor:** Sir Bilal Munshi

**Submitted by:** Shahmeer Khan – 25156

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China as a Neo-Confucian state, a debate that remains hollow without first understanding what actually constitutes a Neo-Confucian state and even more so, what Confucianism represents. The idea popularized in East Asia doesn’t simply define as a theory, but as a way of life, a vast inter-connected system of philosophies, rituals, practices, habits that dictates life as a whole. Named after its originator Confucius, an ancient philosopher who dates back to 439 BCE, Confucianism promotes human-centered virtues for living a peaceful life.[[1]](#footnote-1) Values that have transcended time as they still dictate the success of modern-day China.

The reason this ideology has such a chokehold on the minds of the Chinese populus is its motives, unlike most other philosophies, Confucianism aims towards education, it discusses ways to govern, appreciates art, promotes curiosity, the need to learn and grow, these are fundamental human actions that a lot of people forget across their lives yet it’s deeply rooted into the hearts and minds of East Asia, primarily China. As far back as late imperial China, even those without access to books or knowledge followed Confucian ideals in their day to day lives unknowingly, the teachings that were passed down from generations required no formal education to place itself in the Chinese psyche. Originating from China it eventually reached other East Asian countries like Korea, Japan and Vietnam. Though a few scholars judged imperial era Confucianism for being too harsh and rigid thus leaving gaps for flaws, modern-day Confucianism has reached this level of perfection due to the hard work of several scholars who refined and appropriated its ideals across several centuries, despite China being the forerunner, at one point during the 16th century, Korea was known as the most Confucian country at the time which goes to show the international effect this religious ideology had on the world.[[2]](#footnote-2) A core reason of Confucianism being held in such high regard is its ties to Chinese culture. Though often idolized, Greek and roman history is limited to literature whereas China endures a strong appreciation of its history dating all the way back to the Shang Dynasty.

Moving on from the historical point of view, we arrive at the birth of a new system, Neo-Confucianism. Scholars of the past argued amongst for a need of a sophisticated metaphysical basis to dictate the ethical codes that they preached through Confucianism, in competition with Buddhism which was way more developed at this point, these individuals were the fore-runners of what eventually led to the development of Neo-Confucianism, a philosophical and ethical movement that permeated China during the Song dynasty, implementing Confucian ideals with elements of Buddhism and Daoism, two other religions that hold great value in East Asia. One of the most notable contributors to the growth of Neo-Confucianism was a scholar named Zhu Xi who helped define a value system centered on personal growth and self-improvement.[[3]](#footnote-3) After its genesis and the revival of ancient Confucianism ideals in this new format, Neo-Confucianism reached new levels of intellectual and social creativity as it brought about gatherings of speculative philosophers, painters, poets, doctors, social ethicists, political theorists etc. By integrating people from all walks of life[[4]](#footnote-4), it unified ideals about modernity and tradition from different viewpoints. Zhu’s teachings were carried on by schools of Neo-Confucianism who built on Zhu’s work to further enrich Confucianism as a whole.

This was seen as a golden period until the movement started having troubles of its own. The major proponents of Confucianism started coming under influence by western ideologies and rule, Vietnam in the early 19th century came under attack by Napoleon to become a French colony in July 1857.[[5]](#footnote-5) Another focal point was Korea in 1910 was annexed by the Empire of Japan after years of war and intimidation.[[6]](#footnote-6) Japan itself being influenced by Western ideals of power, control and international prestige had succumbed to the greed and demise brought upon by neoliberalism methodologies pushed by the west. In October 1911, revolutionaries in southern China launched a successful uprising that overthrew the Qing Dynasty, bringing an end to the imperial system and leading to the formation of the Republic of China.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Qing dynasty which at this point was the last beacon of hope for Confucianism had also succumbed to the westernization of East Asia which showed no room for Confucianism in the modernization of East Asia. During the early 19th century after the uprising, China became increasingly susceptive to western influence and scholars began to fear for the loss of the Confucian way of life, and in turn its culture and ideals.[[8]](#footnote-8) While there were several factors for this demise, the growth and popularity of liberal western philosophies overshadowed Confucianism which was seen as a time of the past, in particular the religious aspects of Confucianism which were seen as too conservative, however along the line Japan started to realize that parts of Neo-Confucianism could still gel with modern day ideals and that it didn’t have to completely be a way of life to be integrated into society. This came into being after the second world war, President Harry S. Truman announced on Aug. 14, 1945, that Japan had surrendered unconditionally[[9]](#footnote-9) which although a victory for the west ultimately pointed at a loss for westernization in the East, Japan who boasted the title of the most westernized and modernized country in East Asia had lost, China during this time was going through its own crisis as it came under a communist government which halted the revival of Confucianism. It wasn’t until later that after the second industrial revolution, that business started booming in Asia. Eight countries in East Asia amongst which Japan and South Korea were two became known as the “East Asian Miracle”. With companies like Sony and Toyota flourishing in the international market[[10]](#footnote-10), the world checked to see the similarities between these nations and fell back to a common philosophy that these countries were built on, Confucianism. And the reasons were evident, the core principles promoted the emphasis of a stable family, the importance of education, hard work, and the ability to overlook short term success for long term prosperity. In 1978, following years of strict state control over all productive resources, the Chinese government initiated a significant program of economic reforms[[11]](#footnote-11) further proving the worth of the East Asian ideals. What was once seen as a backwards way of life, a reason for the downfall of society, this new wave of Confucianism started appearing as a solution to all problems for all aspects of life eventually integrating itself deep into China’s philosophy all over again.

We then move to modern China which harbors beliefs from Confucian teachings and aligns them with its socialist point of view. Several pillars dictate the Chinese state, to begin with we look at the CCP, the Chinese Communist Party. Founded as both a political party and a revolutionary movement in 1921 by revolutionaries such as Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu[[12]](#footnote-12), the CCP was officially established in 1949 and has been in power ever since. It promotes several ideals that bank on Confucian methodologies to maintain state level control yet keep the population happy. Promoting beliefs like emphasis on social harmony, a respect for hierarchy and authority and teaching collectivism and duty, the CCP looks to bolster unity in the Chinese population in favor of the state, this level of indoctrination is strictly enforced from the time you are born till the day you die ensuring you live for the state till the very end. The west often argues that this level of control leads to chaos and that individualistic opinions matter, the CCP however counters this by actually working for the people. By ensuring a high quality of life, the people remain happy in serving the state thus enabling it to prosper. Boasting high values for Purchasing Power, safety, climate, healthcare and cost of living,[[13]](#footnote-13) China ensures its population is satisfied and thus willing to obey, in contrast the west is in utmost turmoil for instance the United States which has declined and relative to its wealthy, world-power rivals ranking just 28th in social progress[[14]](#footnote-14), as the quality of life falters the government still sells a nightmare sugarcoated as the “”American dream”. Another strong pillar of the Chinese state is the socialist ruling, which again emphasizes the state over individualism making sure you always aim to serve the state over yourself. China being a socialist market economy pursues social betterment; it aims for the growth of its future generations over its current situation[[15]](#footnote-15). Under the CCP, China implements this model with utmost control over its economy halting any favor to the socio-economic elite. In contrast in 2023 the top 3% of Japan's richest households held 26% of the country's household net assets[[16]](#footnote-16) which shows the country’s ties to western ideals. A third pillar is the nationalist and patriotic mindset deeply engrained into every Chinese citizen’s mind, be it through force or through benefits, China encourages a patriotic individual in every circumstance and make it mandatory to pledge allegiance to the state. Media Control and strictness is another major factor in China’s dominance, while often seen as extreme by other nations, it has proven to be crucial to ensure China’s success. While the constitution claims citizens’ freedom of speech, the opacity of Chinese media regulations allows authorities to dominate news stories by claiming that they expose state secrets and endanger the country’s ideals and people.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This format of governance and authority not only limits itself to the media but is also enforced in daily life, a prime example is covid-19. Being the center of the outbreak, the world expected China to collapse, however it was one of the fastest to respond and bring the situation under control. By enacting measures like Wuhan being subjected to a strict lockdown lasting 76 days, during which public transportation was halted. Shortly after, comparable restrictions were introduced in all cities throughout Hubei province. Nationwide, approximately 14,000 health checkpoints were set up at public transportation hubs.[[18]](#footnote-18) Several such measures enabled a strong response to dealing with the epidemic. It was due to China’s control of the people and state that this execution was so flawless, even going to the lengths of arresting citizens that broke curfew. The media had its own fair share of the total impact as Chinese authorities dealt with the first whistleblower of covid-19 and other critics of its coronavirus policies harshly. Another COVID whistleblower, Fang Bin, was jailed for three years before being reportedly released last year, according to media reports.[[19]](#footnote-19) This again ties back to worldwide criticism of China for this act and yet it remained firm stating that such news endangers the country again emphasizing the point that you cannot speak against the state under any circumstance and that you must always have the state at heart over everything else. This structural approach heavily relies on the Chinese governments ideal of state over everything else. The core belief still being that the people serve the state and the state serves the people, although strict they enforce a hierarchical system throughout their policies based on Confucian ideals where the state is atop everything else. The current situation all over the world shows the failure of democracy, something China has managed to successfully evade throughout the years. I mentioned how China ensures a high quality of life to keep its population obedient; it's due to that exact comfort and pleasure that China gets to boss around its civilians without repercussions. Human rights lawyer Ding Jiaxi has been detained since December 2019 on charges of subverting state power. Similarly, Xu Zhiyong, a legal scholar, was also arrested on the same charge.[[20]](#footnote-20) Several cases like these appear where the government asserts dominance over the people, instilling fear throughout them for those that dare speak against the state. This lethality reminds the people of who’s in charge yet also shows them of the benefits of being obedient and serving the state; i.e. the quality of life and other incredible amenities offered by the government for the prosperity of the people. Another version of this hierarchy is implemented via the social credit system implemented by China, where similar to a Fico score, you’re judged on several factors that determine your loyalty to the state, a lower score or being blacklisted can induce problems like Travel bans where 23 million people have been blacklisted from travelling by plane or train due to low social credit ratings. Under the social credit system, students may be barred from enrolling in certain universities or schools if their parents possess a low social credit score. This policy reflects the broader impact of the system, where an individual’s opportunities can be influenced by their family’s standing. There have even been cases of public shaming where authorities often promote the practice of “naming and shaming” individuals who appear on social credit blacklists which involves publicly disclosing their names and offenses as a way to warn against behavior against the state and reinforce social norms.[[21]](#footnote-21) All these situations highlight the prominence of serving the country and the problems faced if you are to deter from that goal.

We then take a look at “collectivism” and “authoritarianism”. Firstly authoritarianism, a system of government where power is tightly held by a single ruler or a small group, and opposition is suppressed to maintain control. Rather than allowing open competition, it uses state-run parties and organizations to direct public support toward the regime’s goals.[[22]](#footnote-22) Leaving no room for competitors an authoritarian state ensures its control over the people. Collectivism, on the other hand refers to a social organization in which the individual is seen as being subordinate to a social collectivity such as a state, a nation or a social class[[23]](#footnote-23). By looking deeper into the two it’s evident that they can go hand in hand, as they do in China’s situation. The socialist state enforces authoritarian rule through the CCP while also ensuring that the people are reminded that they will forever be servants to the state and will also be under authority as a collective under the party that makes the decisions. When we look at political philosophy, the term social contract refers to a real or imagined agreement made either among the governed themselves or between the governed and their rulers, which outlines the rights and responsibilities of each party.[[24]](#footnote-24) This however isn’t the same when it comes to China’s policy which has redefined the social contract to serve their needs where the juniors (the people) obey the seniors (the state). It takes from Confucian ideology of strong family bonds and hierarchy within families where sons come under fathers and so on, except implementing that logic nationwide to govern the people. Collectivism isn’t a thing of the present in China’s case as the philosophy dates back to Mao Zedong’s era where the government supported the formation of mutual aid teams among villagers, where peasants were urged to share their resources, equipment, machinery, and skills collectively in 1952. While implemented differently now, the idea remains the same, as Mao himself stated peasants as having “a spontaneous tendency towards capitalism”. To prevent this collectivism was encouraged early on and has been refined as time has passed. A prime example of authoritarianism in China is Xi JingPing’s anti corruption campaign which followed a series of purges in recent months of senior officials and industry executives.[[25]](#footnote-25) While a few deemed it to be an excuse to eliminate rivals, it proves the fact that China governs with an authoritarian rule doing anything in its power to ensure full control. While the world judges the harshness, China proves that by handling problems in their early stages, they maintain better control. In contrast we look at Kashmir in Pakistan, as warned by the previous prime minister, who has said he had been trying to raise the alarm at the UN about the danger of a nuclear war breaking out over Kashmir.[[26]](#footnote-26) This dates back to 2019, when Imran Khan was ridiculed for worrying too much. Fast forward to modern day Pakistan where India implied it believes Pakistan may have indirectly supported the Pahalgam attack which caused the deaths of individuals in Indian owned Kashmir[[27]](#footnote-27), in response India launched an attack on Pakistan and tensions escalated to a potential nuclear war between the two which was then mediated to a ceasefire by the US. This situation had the US and the UN intervened in its early stages would have been dealt with avoiding several casualties on both ends. Similarly, due to Imran Khan not having authoritarian rule and control over the state, he was eventuallyremoved from power after losing a no-confidence vote in his leadership.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In conclusion, while the world may judge China for its strict enactment of rules, claiming it’s clinging to its past and culture and too conservative, China has proven time and time again the fruits of its labor. One may wonder whether China enforces authoritarian Confucianism or just authoritarianism labelled as following Confucianism. While both arguments may be true, it’s evident that whatever China does is working. As of now China is leading the race to being the worlds strongest nation in every aspect, currency, technology, healthcare, warfare etc. It’s at the point that the US has resorted to forming ties with Saudi Arabia where Donald J. Trump announced Saudi Arabia’s $600-billion commitment to invest in the United States.[[29]](#footnote-29) This taking place despite the US’s allegiance with Israel which it chooses to ignore signifies their desperate situation. Meanwhile China on the other hand dominates the US in almost every aspect where the rest of the world is plagued by protests, people in China don’t dare raise a voice. Regardless, there’s no lie that Confucianism still runs deep in China’s regime and will continue to do so as it proves superiority over the neoliberalist ideals the west pushes time and time again.

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