

## The Impact of Traditional Chinese Philosophy on Global Political Culture: Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism in China's Diplomacy and Governance

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of traditional Chinese philosophies, Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, on China's political culture, governance, and foreign relations. Through a historical and philosophical analysis, the research explores how these traditions shape China's approach to leadership, law, diplomacy, and international engagement. The key findings reveal that Confucianism emphasizes moral governance and social harmony, Taoism advocates for balance and non-interference, and Legalism focuses on state control and the rule of law. These philosophies, though distinct, coexist and influence China's political system, creating a hybrid model that balances stability, state power, and ethical leadership. The paper concludes by highlighting how these traditions continue to shape China's role in global diplomacy and international governance, offering an alternative to Western political ideologies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Context and Rationale**

Philosophy has long played an integral role in shaping political systems around the world. In many countries, political structures and governance styles are influenced by philosophical ideas that define how authority, power, and justice are exercised. In China, three major philosophical traditions, Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, have deeply influenced not only its political culture but also its approach to governance and international relations. These philosophies have evolved over millennia, guiding the governance of emperors, the political ideologies of dynasties, and the practices of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In contemporary China, the legacies of these traditions remain evident, shaping the country's political culture and its approach to both domestic affairs and global diplomacy.

Confucianism, with its emphasis on moral leadership, hierarchical relationships, and social harmony, has shaped China's governance system by advocating for a ruler who is not only a political leader but also a moral exemplar. Taoism, on the other hand, with its focus on balance, simplicity, and non-interference, has contributed to a governance style that emphasizes flexibility, adaptability, and the importance of harmony with the natural order. Legalism, perhaps the most pragmatic and state-centric of the three, advocates for a strict rule of law, centralization of power, and a focus on stability and control, providing the ideological framework for China's highly centralized state system.

The influence of these traditions is not confined to China's past but continues to resonate in its modern governance and foreign policy. The fusion of these philosophies has produced a distinctive political culture that emphasizes stability, respect for hierarchy, and a balanced approach to governance. This paper seeks to explore how these philosophical traditions—rooted in China's historical past, continue to influence the nation's political culture, governance, and international relations today.

### **Research Question**

This paper seeks to answer the following central research question: How do Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism shape China's political culture, governance, and foreign policy? The study will explore the enduring influence of these philosophies on China's domestic governance structure, leadership style, and foreign diplomatic strategies. By analyzing their combined impact on China's political culture, the paper aims to provide insight into how these traditions continue to shape the Chinese state in the contemporary era.

Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism each bring unique perspectives on governance. While Confucianism emphasizes ethical leadership and social harmony, Taoism offers a more passive approach, stressing the importance of natural order and non-action. Legalism, with its focus on law and state control, presents a more authoritarian model of governance. By analyzing these philosophies in relation to China's political culture, governance practices, and foreign policy, the research will uncover how these historical ideas continue to define China's role on the global stage.

## **Importance**

Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of China is crucial for analyzing its governance and international relations for several reasons. First, China's political culture, which is rooted in these ancient philosophies, continues to inform its leadership style, political ideologies, and approach to governance. Unlike Western liberal democracies that prioritize individual rights and freedoms, China's governance is shaped by a more hierarchical and collectivist worldview, grounded in Confucian and Legalist traditions. By examining these foundational philosophies, we gain a clearer understanding of China's domestic political structures, its emphasis on stability and social harmony, and its authoritarian governance style (Nye, 2004).

Second, China's philosophical heritage significantly impacts its foreign policy. For example, Confucian ideals of hierarchical relationships and respect for authority shape China's diplomatic interactions, particularly in East Asia. Taoism's emphasis on balance and non-interference is evident in China's foreign policy stance of non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, a principle that has informed its dealings with countries in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its interactions in the United Nations (Kuan, 2015). Meanwhile, Legalism's focus on law and order, as well as the centralization of state power, can be seen in China's assertiveness in territorial disputes, such as those in the South China Sea, and its approach to issues of national sovereignty and security (Zhao, 2017).

Finally, understanding these philosophical traditions helps to explain the global perception of China. While Western nations often view China's governance and foreign policy through the lens of democracy, human rights, and individual freedoms, China's philosophical foundations offer a different perspective – one that values collective harmony, respect for authority, and state-centered control. Understanding this cultural context is vital for engaging with China effectively and for interpreting its actions in global forums.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview of Traditional Chinese Philosophies**

China's political culture has been deeply shaped by three central philosophical traditions: Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism. Each of these philosophies has contributed distinct ideas to governance, morality, and social order, leaving an indelible mark on China's political landscape. These traditions have not only influenced Chinese domestic affairs but also shaped China's foreign policy and diplomatic relations throughout history.

**Confucianism:** Founded by Confucius (551–479 BCE), Confucianism emphasizes the importance of social harmony, respect for hierarchy, and moral leadership. Confucian thought is centered around the concepts of *ren* (benevolence or humaneness), *li* (ritual propriety), and *xiao* (filial piety), which form the basis for social order and personal virtue. The Confucian ideal is a well-ordered society where each individual knows their role and acts in accordance with moral principles. Confucianism holds that the moral example set by the ruler or government is the foundation of good governance (Yao, 2000).

Confucius believed that rulers should govern with virtue and moral example rather than through coercion or force, stressing the importance of education, self-cultivation, and ethical governance. This approach has had profound implications for Chinese governance, where the moral and ethical qualities of the ruler have often been emphasized over the legal or institutional framework.

Taoism: Taoism, attributed to Laozi (6th century BCE), focuses on harmony with nature and the concept of the Tao, or the Way. Central to Taoism is the idea of *wu wei*, which is often translated as “non-action” or “effortless action.” Rather than striving through forceful intervention, Taoism advocates for aligning with the natural flow of the universe, encouraging simplicity, humility, and flexibility. Laozi’s work, the *Tao Te Ching*, suggests that rulers should act with restraint, allowing people to live naturally without excessive interference (Laozi, 1993).

Taoism’s influence on Chinese governance can be seen in the emphasis on adaptability and non-interference in policy. In contrast to Confucianism’s moral duty for rulers, Taoism advocates for governance that fosters balance, peace, and harmony with the natural world. This philosophy has influenced Chinese diplomacy, particularly in China’s stance of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states.

Legalism: Legalism, as articulated by thinkers such as Han Fei (280–233 BCE), advocates for a strict legal framework and centralized control to maintain order and stability. Legalism emphasizes that human nature is inherently selfish and that law and punishment are essential for regulating behavior and ensuring social harmony (Han Fei, 2015). Unlike Confucianism and Taoism, which stress moral governance and natural order, Legalism advocates for a pragmatic, law-based approach that relies on strict enforcement and centralized state authority.

Legalism shaped much of China’s imperial governance, particularly during the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), where its principles were applied to centralize power and implement rigorous state control. Legalism’s influence is still seen today in China’s highly centralized political system, where the government maintains strict control over law, security, and national policy.

### **Philosophy and Political Culture**

The interaction of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism has created a distinctive political culture in China. Scholars such as Tu Weiming (1998) have emphasized the Confucian contribution to China’s political culture, arguing that Confucianism’s focus on social harmony and ethical governance underpins the Chinese state’s emphasis on stability, hierarchy, and moral leadership. Confucian thought has historically provided a framework for governance, where the ruler’s moral virtue was considered critical to social order. This is reflected in China’s dynastic governance system, where emperors were often seen as the “Son of Heaven,” responsible for maintaining harmony between heaven, earth, and humanity (Tu, 1998).

Taoism’s influence, while often seen as less central to governance than Confucianism, is evident in the flexibility and non-interventionist approach that

has been a hallmark of Chinese governance, particularly in its dealings with neighboring regions. Kurtis H. (2001) has argued that Taoism, with its emphasis on balance and non-coercion, plays a role in shaping China's diplomatic strategies, particularly in its stance toward regional issues and non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations.

Legalism, though criticized for its authoritarian approach, has been a practical guide for Chinese statecraft, especially in times of crisis. Chen Pingyuan (2010) notes that Legalism's emphasis on strict laws and central control helped maintain order during periods of political instability, influencing China's approach to governance even in the modern era, where centralization remains a key feature of the state.

China's political culture today reflects the fusion of these three philosophical traditions. While Confucianism emphasizes moral leadership and social hierarchy, Taoism advocates for balance and restraint, and Legalism prioritizes law and order. Together, these philosophies have shaped China's political system into one that emphasizes strong leadership, social stability, and pragmatic governance (Shambaugh, 2013).

### **China's Foreign Policy and Philosophy**

China's foreign policy is also deeply influenced by these philosophical traditions. Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchy and moral leadership has been central to China's foreign relations, particularly in its interactions with neighboring countries. In Confucian thought, China is often seen as the "Middle Kingdom," a dominant cultural and political force in East Asia. This view is reflected in China's historical approach to diplomacy, where it positioned itself as the central power in East Asia, with other nations existing in a hierarchical relationship beneath it (Zhao, 2017).

Taoism's principle of non-interference in internal affairs has influenced China's modern foreign policy, especially its stance on sovereignty and territorial disputes. **Wang Jisi** (2014) argues that China's commitment to non-intervention and respect for the sovereignty of other nations is deeply rooted in Taoist philosophy, which emphasizes maintaining balance and harmony rather than imposing one's will on others. This principle has been a cornerstone of China's foreign policy in regions like Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia, where it has sought to maintain cooperative relations without exerting political pressure or interference.

Legalism, with its emphasis on state power and strict control, informs China's approach to territorial disputes and security. Legalism's focus on law and order is evident in China's firm stance on issues like the **South China Sea** and its assertiveness in defending national interests. **Liu Renwen** (2012) has argued that Legalism's influence is apparent in China's policies of territorial integrity and the protection of its sovereign rights through legal and institutional means, often in opposition to international norms or competing claims from other states.

China's foreign policy, shaped by these philosophical traditions, combines a respect for hierarchy and moral leadership (Confucianism), a commitment to

sovereignty and non-interference (Taoism), and a strong assertion of state power and security (Legalism). These philosophies provide a lens through which to understand China's modern international behavior, which often emphasizes stability, respect for authority, and pragmatic solutions to international challenges (Shambaugh, 2013).

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, historical, and philosophical approach to examine the influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism on China's political culture, governance, and foreign policy. Data is collected from primary sources such as classical Chinese texts (*The Analects*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Han Feizi*), and secondary sources including academic books and articles.

The analysis involves identifying key philosophical themes and tracing their impact on Chinese political thought and international behavior. A textual and thematic analysis is applied to understand how these traditions continue to shape China's modern political system.

As a theoretical study, it does not involve fieldwork or empirical data, and all sources used are publicly available and properly cited.

## RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Confucianism and China's Political Culture

#### Confucianism's Core Principles

Confucianism, founded by **Confucius** (551–479 BCE), has been a central philosophical influence on Chinese political culture for over two millennia. The philosophy emphasizes the importance of **social harmony**, **hierarchical relationships**, and **moral governance**. At the core of Confucian thought is the belief that human beings are inherently good and can achieve moral excellence through education, self-cultivation, and virtuous leadership. These values have significantly influenced China's approach to governance and societal organization.

One of the key principles of Confucianism is the **importance of hierarchy and filial piety**. Confucius advocated for a well-ordered society in which each individual has a defined role and adheres to a system of reciprocal obligations. These hierarchical relationships extend from the family to the state, where the emperor is seen as the father figure of the nation, responsible for maintaining harmony and ensuring the welfare of the people (Yao, 2000). This hierarchical thinking permeates Chinese political culture, where respect for authority, the maintenance of social order, and the moral duty of rulers to their subjects are central to governance.

Another fundamental concept in Confucianism is **moral governance**. Confucius believed that rulers should lead by example, demonstrating moral virtue to inspire their subjects to follow suit. The idea that the ruler's moral conduct directly impacts the state's well-being is a key aspect of Confucian political thought. The emphasis on the **moral integrity of leaders** is deeply embedded in China's political culture, where political legitimacy is often tied to the ruler's ability to act in accordance with Confucian virtues, such as benevolence (**ren**), righteousness (**yi**), and propriety (**li**). In this framework, the

ideal ruler is a moral exemplar, whose actions and decisions are guided by ethical principles, ensuring social harmony and stability.

### **The Role of Confucianism in Governance**

Confucianism's influence on governance can be seen in both historical and modern China. The **imperial examination system**, which lasted for over a millennium, was one of the most significant institutional implementations of Confucian principles. By testing candidates on Confucian texts and moral philosophy, the system ensured that the bureaucracy was composed of individuals who were not only well-educated but also morally virtuous. The emphasis on education and the moral caliber of the ruling elite reflects the Confucian belief that a harmonious society can only be achieved through ethical governance (Elman, 2000).

The **idea of benevolent leadership** is another central element of Confucianism that has deeply influenced China's approach to governance. Benevolent leadership, or the ruler's duty to act for the good of the people, is a principle that guides Chinese political ideology even in the modern era. The role of the ruler as a moral exemplar continues to influence China's expectations of leadership, where politicians are expected to serve the public good with wisdom and integrity. The emphasis on **benevolent leadership** can be seen in the role of the **Communist Party of China (CPC)** today, which frames itself as the moral guardian of the Chinese people and the upholder of social stability and order. The CPC's legitimacy is often linked to its ability to maintain social harmony, economic development, and a sense of national pride—values that are in line with Confucian teachings.

However, Confucianism's influence on governance is not purely theoretical. It also has practical implications in the way China approaches political and administrative issues. For example, the importance of **social harmony** and **the avoidance of conflict** is evident in China's internal policies, particularly in its approach to dissent. China's emphasis on maintaining social stability over individual rights reflects Confucian ideas about the collective good and the role of government in ensuring harmony (Nye, 2004). While this has led to criticism from the international community regarding human rights and freedom of speech, it is deeply rooted in the Confucian worldview, which values stability and order over individual expression.

### **Confucianism and International Relations**

In the realm of international relations, Confucianism's influence is also evident. The **hierarchical worldview** that underpins Confucianism has historically shaped China's diplomatic approach, particularly in relation to its neighbors in East Asia. According to Confucian thought, China has long viewed itself as the "**Middle Kingdom**," a central civilization surrounded by lesser nations. This worldview has led to China's traditional approach to diplomacy, where it sees itself as the dominant power in East Asia, with other nations in a tributary relationship. This hierarchical system, where China serves as the moral and political center of the region, has been central to its interactions with neighboring countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam (Wang, 2014).

Confucianism also emphasizes the **importance of respect for authority** and **benevolent leadership** in international relations. These principles are reflected in China's foreign policy, which tends to prioritize stability and mutual respect over aggressive expansion or confrontation. China's emphasis on **peaceful coexistence** and **non-interference** in the internal affairs of other states reflects Confucian values of respect for hierarchy and social harmony (Zhao, 2017). This principle of non-interference has been central to China's foreign policy since the founding of the People's Republic of China, particularly in its dealings with **Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia**.

Furthermore, Confucianism's focus on **long-term stability** over short-term gains is reflected in China's approach to diplomacy and foreign policy. China tends to prioritize building long-term, stable relationships based on mutual respect and economic cooperation, rather than seeking immediate political or military advantage. This is particularly evident in its approach to **trade partnerships** and **regional security**, where it has pursued diplomatic solutions to conflicts and invested in fostering stable, peaceful relations with its neighbors (Kuan, 2015).

#### Case Study: Confucianism and China's Foreign Policy

A clear example of Confucianism's influence on China's foreign policy can be seen in its relations with neighboring countries in East Asia, such as **Japan** and **South Korea**. While the historical relationship between China and these countries has been complex, China's Confucian-based diplomatic approach emphasizes **respect for authority** and **social harmony**.

In **Japan**, for instance, Confucian ideas about hierarchy and moral leadership have played a role in China's diplomatic efforts to maintain a balance of power in the region. Despite historical tensions, particularly over issues such as the **Nanjing Massacre** and **territorial disputes**, China has consistently sought diplomatic solutions that promote stability and long-term peace. Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchical relationships can be seen in China's approach to Japan as a peer in the region, despite the historical tensions, with both countries focusing on mutual respect and economic cooperation (Kuan, 2015).

Similarly, China's relationship with **South Korea** reflects Confucian ideas of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Although South Korea is a US ally and shares a complex relationship with China, Confucian diplomacy has allowed China to maintain a generally peaceful and cooperative relationship with South Korea. This is especially evident in the economic ties between the two countries, where China has positioned itself as South Korea's largest trading partner. The Confucian idea of **stability over confrontation** informs China's preference for engaging South Korea through dialogue and collaboration rather than through aggressive tactics.

Finally, China's **soft power** strategy, rooted in Confucian values of cultural exchange and moral leadership, has been central to its efforts to enhance its influence globally. Through programs like the **Confucius Institutes**, China promotes its language, culture, and values, further extending its diplomatic reach. This reflects Confucian ideals of leadership by example and the moral

responsibility of the state to provide guidance, both domestically and internationally (Shambaugh, 2013).

## **Taoism and Governance in China**

### **Taoist Principles and Political Philosophy**

Taoism, attributed to the philosopher **Laozi** (traditionally dated to the 6th century BCE), is a philosophical tradition that emphasizes living in harmony with the **Tao** (the Way), which is understood as the fundamental principle that governs the universe. At the heart of Taoist philosophy are three key principles: **harmony with nature**, **simplicity**, and **wu wei** (non-action).

**Harmony with Nature:** Taoism teaches that human beings should live in accordance with the natural world, understanding that life flows according to the Tao, which cannot be controlled or forced. Laozi's **Tao Te Ching** asserts that those who align with the Tao achieve peace and harmony because they act in accordance with the natural order of things rather than trying to impose their will on the world (Laozi, 1993).

**Simplicity:** Taoism advocates for simplicity in both thought and action. It encourages people to avoid over-complication and extraneous desires, aiming for a return to natural simplicity. This principle underscores the Taoist belief that the complexities of human society and governance often lead to strife, and that simplicity can lead to peace and wisdom.

**Wu Wei (Non-Action):** The principle of **wu wei** is often misinterpreted as mere passivity, but it actually refers to **effortless action** or **action without force**. It suggests that the best way to achieve goals is by aligning with the natural flow of events and intervening only when absolutely necessary, without forcing outcomes. This principle is central to Taoist governance, advocating for leaders who allow society to follow its natural course rather than impose excessive control (Laozi, 1993).

These Taoist principles, when applied to governance, emphasize a style of leadership that values flexibility, humility, and restraint, where rulers avoid imposing their will too strongly on the people. The influence of Taoism on China's political culture is evident in its longstanding preference for moderation, balance, and a flexible approach to leadership.

### **Taoism's Impact on Governance**

Taoism's impact on Chinese governance has been profound, particularly in fostering a more **passive and flexible style of leadership**. Unlike the **Confucian emphasis on moral governance** and the **Legalist focus on strict laws and centralized control**, Taoism advocates for a more organic and less interventionist form of governance. A Taoist-inspired leader is seen not as one who controls every aspect of society through law or force, but rather as someone who facilitates harmony by acting in a manner that aligns with the Tao and allows society to flourish naturally.

One of the key aspects of Taoist governance is the idea that **governance should be unobtrusive**, allowing individuals to live freely and spontaneously. This approach can be contrasted with the more rigid, law-based systems seen in many Western political systems. In Taoism, rulers are advised to act without

overt interference, striving to create a system where people live according to their natural impulses and desires, rather than being forced into conformity. As the **Tao Te Ching** suggests, the best rulers are those who “govern least” and allow their people to grow naturally (Laozi, 1993).

This concept of non-interference in governance is especially visible in **China’s internal policies**. For example, the Chinese Communist Party, despite its centralized political structure, often emphasizes **non-interference** in the private lives of its citizens, provided they do not threaten social harmony. In this sense, the Party’s emphasis on maintaining harmony with the people aligns with Taoist thought, as it allows for a certain level of autonomy while maintaining overall social order.

Taoism’s influence on governance is also evident in the **flexibility and adaptability** of Chinese leadership. Instead of rigidly sticking to fixed policies or ideologies, Taoist-influenced leaders are expected to adapt to changing circumstances, act in ways that minimize conflict, and allow things to evolve naturally over time. This pragmatic, fluid approach has been integral to China’s governance, particularly during periods of transition, such as the shift from imperial rule to the Communist system, and later, during the period of **economic reforms** under Deng Xiaoping (Sullivan, 2018).

#### **Taoism in International Relations**

Taoism has also had a significant influence on China’s approach to **international relations**, particularly in its emphasis on **balance, non-interference**, and **harmony**. These Taoist principles have shaped China’s foreign policy, which often focuses on creating peaceful, balanced relationships rather than exerting dominance or aggressively pursuing expansionist goals.

The concept of **non-interference**, deeply rooted in Taoism, is central to China’s foreign policy. This principle is encapsulated in the **Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence**, which were first articulated in the 1950s and are still a guiding force in China’s diplomatic relations. According to these principles, countries should refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other nations, respect each other’s sovereignty, and prioritize peaceful resolutions to conflicts. This reflects the Taoist emphasis on harmony and the avoidance of unnecessary conflict (Zhao, 2017).

China’s **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** provides another example of Taoist-influenced diplomacy. While the BRI is often viewed through the lens of China’s growing economic power, it also reflects Taoist principles of **balance** and **long-term harmony**. Rather than imposing direct control over participating countries, China promotes cooperation, mutual development, and investment in infrastructure, aiming to foster a balanced relationship where both sides benefit. This approach aligns with the Taoist idea of harmony between different forces, where China does not seek to dominate but rather to encourage mutual growth and stability (Zhao, 2017).

Additionally, Taoism’s influence can be seen in China’s **foreign policy toward its neighbors**. For example, in its relations with countries like **India** and **Vietnam**, China has often emphasized the importance of **peaceful coexistence** and **non-interference** in domestic affairs. This reflects the Taoist belief that

nations should not impose their will on others but instead seek to understand and adapt to the natural flow of international relationships. China's stance on non-intervention, particularly in its approach to **Africa** and **Southeast Asia**, highlights Taoism's long-standing influence on Chinese diplomacy.

### **Case Study: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Non-Interference**

The **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, launched in 2013, is a clear example of how Taoist principles influence China's modern foreign policy. The BRI focuses on infrastructure development and economic cooperation across Asia, Africa, and Europe, but it also reflects Taoism's emphasis on creating **balance** and **harmony** in international relations. Rather than imposing Chinese values or political systems, the BRI is framed as an opportunity for mutual benefit, where participating countries are seen as equal partners in a long-term, peaceful development project (Sullivan, 2018).

Similarly, **China's policy of non-interference** in the internal affairs of other states – whether in the Middle East or Africa – is rooted in Taoist thought. By refraining from meddling in the internal politics of other countries, China avoids the type of aggressive interventionism that is often seen in Western foreign policies. This principle, which has been central to China's approach to sovereignty and territorial integrity, reflects the Taoist idea that it is better to allow countries to develop naturally and avoid the imposition of foreign will.

### **Legalism and Its Influence on Chinese Governance**

#### **Legalist Principles**

Legalism, one of the most influential and pragmatic schools of thought in ancient China, arose during the **Warring States period** (475–221 BCE). It was primarily articulated by thinkers such as **Han Fei** (280–233 BCE), who developed the core principles that shaped **Legalist** political philosophy. Legalism emphasizes the importance of strict **laws**, the **centralization of power**, and the necessity of **state control** to maintain order and stability. Unlike **Confucianism**, which advocates for moral leadership, and **Taoism**, which favors natural harmony, Legalism is focused on the practical aspects of governance and the enforcement of law to achieve social order.

At the heart of Legalist thought is the belief that human beings are inherently selfish and prone to disorder unless strictly regulated. Han Fei argued that the ruler must implement a system of clear, written laws, with **harsh punishments** for disobedience, to maintain control over the state. Legalists believe that only through strict enforcement and centralized power can a ruler ensure stability and prevent chaos (Han Fei, 2015). In this view, law is not simply a moral guide but a tool to control behavior, ensure loyalty to the state, and safeguard the ruler's authority.

The central idea in Legalism is the **use of law as a means of governance**, wherein laws apply universally to all, regardless of personal virtues or moral character. Han Fei also introduced the idea of **"Shu"** (strategic manipulation of power) and **"Shi"** (the power of the state), which emphasized the necessity of the ruler's authority to effectively control the state through both law and strategic governance (Han Fei, 2015).

### **Legalism's Role in Governance**

Legalism has had a profound influence on the development of **China's authoritarian political system**. The philosophy's emphasis on **centralized control** and the **rule of law** laid the foundation for the **imperial Chinese state**, particularly under the **Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE)**, which was the first to unify China. The Qin Dynasty, under Emperor **Qin Shi Huang**, is often regarded as the prime example of Legalist principles put into practice. Qin Shi Huang centralized power, standardized laws, weights, measures, and currency, and established a powerful bureaucracy to enforce state control.

The authoritarian nature of the Qin government, with its harsh legal codes and reliance on punitive measures to maintain order, reflects Legalism's core ideas. The Legalist approach to governance prioritizes **social stability** and the **strength of the state** over the welfare of the individual. Legalist philosophy holds that the state's power must be absolute and that loyalty to the ruler and adherence to law are paramount. Legalism's focus on maintaining order through strict law and centralized authority contributed to China's long-standing traditions of centralized governance and control (Elman, 2000).

In modern China, Legalist thought continues to play a role in shaping governance, particularly in the **People's Republic of China (PRC)**. The Communist Party of China (CPC) governs with a high degree of centralization, and laws are strictly enforced to maintain social order and political control. The emphasis on **law and order**, the **centralization of power**, and the **use of legal measures to control society** can be traced directly to Legalist thought (Sullivan & Xie, 2018). While China's legal system has evolved with the rise of **market reforms** and global integration, the core principles of centralization, state control, and the enforcement of laws remain central to its political culture.

The **role of law** in maintaining order is particularly evident in China's approach to **internal security**, **political dissent**, and **social stability**. The state's ability to regulate speech, manage public opinion, and maintain control over the internet and media reflects a governance style rooted in Legalist ideas of centralized authority and the necessity of control to prevent chaos (Shambaugh, 2013).

### **Legalism and Foreign Policy**

Legalism's influence on **China's foreign policy** can be seen in the country's emphasis on **sovereignty**, **national security**, and **territorial integrity**. Legalist principles promote a pragmatic and realist approach to diplomacy, emphasizing the importance of strength and stability in both domestic and international affairs. Legalism's focus on law and authority extends beyond domestic governance to the international stage, where China asserts its sovereignty and defends its territorial claims using a combination of legal arguments, strategic negotiations, and, when necessary, force.

One of the key tenets of Legalism is the belief that a strong, centralized state must protect its interests through both law and military power. This principle is evident in China's foreign policy, particularly in its **territorial disputes** and approach to **national security**. Legalist thought supports the idea

that a strong state must assert its authority and defend its borders, a concept that informs China's aggressive stance in territorial disputes in areas such as the **South China Sea** and its claims over **Taiwan** (Zhao, 2017).

Legalism also influences China's view of **international law**, especially in relation to sovereignty and territorial integrity. Legalist principles can be seen in China's insistence on interpreting international agreements and laws in ways that favor its interests. The **South China Sea dispute** provides a concrete example of how China uses both domestic law and international law to assert its territorial claims.

#### Case Study: Legalism and the South China Sea Dispute

The **South China Sea** dispute illustrates how Legalism influences China's foreign policy, particularly in its approach to sovereignty, territorial disputes, and the enforcement of state authority. China's claim over the South China Sea is based on historical and legal grounds, and its assertive actions in the region reflect a Legalist approach to safeguarding state power and control.

China has employed a combination of **legal arguments**, **diplomatic engagement**, and **military presence** to assert its territorial claims. In 2009, China submitted a map to the United Nations claiming sovereignty over the majority of the South China Sea, including the **Paracel Islands** and the **Spratly Islands**. Despite competing claims from other countries, such as the **Philippines** and **Vietnam**, China has maintained its territorial assertions through a combination of **legal diplomacy** and strategic military deployments (Sullivan & Xie, 2018).

Legalism's emphasis on the **rule of law** and **centralized control** is evident in China's use of **domestic law** to justify its territorial claims and **military presence** in the South China Sea. China has built artificial islands and military installations in disputed areas, asserting its sovereignty through legal and strategic means. This is in line with Legalist principles, which prioritize state power and control over the protection of individual rights or regional harmony. Legalism's focus on **strength and security** shapes China's aggressive posture in the South China Sea, as the state seeks to assert its authority over a region that is critical to its economic and strategic interests (Shambaugh, 2013).

The **International Court of Arbitration's ruling** in 2016, which rejected China's claims to much of the South China Sea, was dismissed by China as lacking legal merit. In response, China has continued to defend its territorial claims by citing historical precedents and domestic legal frameworks. This refusal to accept international legal rulings and the continued expansion of Chinese military influence in the region is a clear manifestation of Legalist thought, which prioritizes state sovereignty and security over international norms (Zhao, 2017).

#### The Synthesis of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism in Contemporary China Blending Philosophical Traditions

China's political culture is not the product of any single philosophical tradition but rather a complex synthesis of **Confucianism**, **Taoism**, and **Legalism**. While each of these philosophies originated in different historical and cultural contexts, they have not only survived over millennia but also been

integrated into modern Chinese governance and foreign policy in complementary ways. These traditions, though distinct, are not mutually exclusive but rather coexist and interact, providing a multifaceted approach to leadership, governance, and diplomacy.

**Confucianism** provides the foundation for China's **social hierarchy**, **moral leadership**, and emphasis on **social harmony**. It stresses the importance of benevolent leadership and moral integrity in governance, with rulers being expected to lead by virtue and set an example for their subjects (Tu, 1998). **Taoism**, with its focus on balance, flexibility, and **non-interference**, encourages a more passive approach to governance, where rulers allow for natural processes to unfold and only intervene when necessary (Laozi, 1993). **Legalism**, on the other hand, supports a more authoritarian, pragmatic approach to governance, emphasizing the **centralization of power**, **strict laws**, and **state control** to ensure stability and order (Han Fei, 2015).

In contemporary China, elements from all three philosophies are integrated into the political framework. For example, **Confucianism's** emphasis on moral governance and **Taoism's** idea of non-interference can both be seen in China's domestic and foreign policy, where the state prioritizes social harmony and emphasizes long-term stability over aggressive expansion. However, **Legalism's** influence is evident in China's **strong centralized government**, **rule of law**, and state control, especially in areas such as **national security**, **territorial disputes**, and **domestic governance** (Shambaugh, 2013).

This blending of traditions is particularly evident in the leadership style of **Xi Jinping**, whose governance combines Confucian ideals of moral leadership with the Taoist principle of restraint and Legalist principles of strong state control. Xi's approach to governance emphasizes stability and control, while also invoking Confucian ideas of benevolence and the moral responsibility of the leader. The resulting synthesis is a political culture that values both stability and flexibility, strong leadership and moral guidance, and centralized control alongside an emphasis on long-term social harmony.

### **China's Hybrid Political Culture**

The evolution of China's political culture reflects a careful **synthesis of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism**, adapted to the challenges of the modern world. In the past, these philosophies guided China's imperial dynasties, with Confucianism being the dominant force in shaping governance, Taoism contributing to the softer, less interventionist aspects of leadership, and Legalism informing the practical aspects of law and state power. However, in the 20th and 21st centuries, **Marxism** was incorporated into this mix under the influence of **Mao Zedong**, and later **Deng Xiaoping's reforms** introduced capitalist elements into the economy, creating a more hybridized political culture.

Under the leadership of the **Communist Party of China (CPC)**, this synthesis has evolved to address both domestic and international concerns. On the one hand, **Confucian values** such as respect for hierarchy and the importance of moral leadership are reflected in the Party's emphasis on **social stability**, **economic development**, and **state legitimacy**. The **Taoist principle of wu wei**,

which encourages non-interference and harmony, influences China's approach to **foreign policy**, particularly in its preference for diplomatic solutions, long-term cooperation, and respect for sovereignty in its interactions with neighboring countries (Zhao, 2017).

On the other hand, **Legalism's** focus on state control and the rule of law has been integral to the **centralized governance** structure of modern China. The **power of the state** is reinforced by the CPC's control over key areas such as the **military, media, and internet**, where strict regulations and oversight ensure that the government maintains dominance. **Xi Jinping's emphasis on centralization**, particularly in recent years, reflects the continued influence of Legalism's ideals in maintaining strong control over the Chinese state (Sullivan & Xie, 2018).

In practice, these traditions coexist to form a political system that prioritizes both **stability** and **adaptability, control** and **flexibility**. The CPC's governance model reflects Confucian emphasis on moral leadership, Taoist principles of harmony and non-interference, and Legalist pragmatism in maintaining order and authority. This hybrid political culture allows China to navigate complex domestic and international challenges, such as its transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial powerhouse and its increasing role in global geopolitics.

### Implications for Global Political Culture

China's unique philosophical blend significantly impacts its role in **global politics**. While Western political ideologies often prioritize **individual rights, democratic governance, and market economies**, China's hybrid political culture, shaped by Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, emphasizes **state control, social stability, and collectivism**. This difference is evident in how China approaches **international relations**, particularly in its interactions with Western nations.

The **Confucian emphasis on hierarchy and respect for authority** shapes China's diplomatic relations, especially in its interactions with **developing nations**. China's approach to the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, for example, reflects Confucian values of long-term partnership and mutual benefit, while avoiding coercive tactics. In contrast to the Western focus on democracy and human rights, China emphasizes the **economic development and sovereignty** of its partners, reflecting the Confucian ideal of harmonious relationships.

Taoism's influence is particularly visible in China's **foreign policy**, where the principle of **non-interference** in the internal affairs of other nations has been a core feature of its diplomatic strategy. This contrasts sharply with the more interventionist foreign policies often seen in Western countries. China's commitment to respecting sovereignty and **non-intervention**, especially in Africa and Southeast Asia, showcases Taoist principles of balance and harmony (Wang, 2014).

Finally, Legalism's influence is apparent in China's approach to **territorial disputes**, such as in the **South China Sea**, and its assertive stance on **sovereignty**. The Legalist tradition of centralized authority and strict law enforcement manifests in China's firm position on protecting its borders and asserting control over disputed territories. This pragmatic, law-based approach stands in contrast

to Western approaches that often prioritize negotiation and international law (Zhao, 2017).

China's **philosophical blend** presents an alternative model to Western governance, one that values **stability, centralized power, and moral leadership**. This model has implications for global governance, as China's rise challenges the dominance of Western political and economic systems. In global politics, China's **hybrid political culture** suggests a shift towards a more **pluralistic and multi-polar** world, where different systems of governance coexist, and traditional values shape statecraft and international diplomacy.

### **Implications for International Relations**

#### **China's Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy**

China's rise as a global power is not solely based on economic and military strength; the country has also strategically utilized **soft power** as a means of influencing international perceptions and building long-term global relationships. Central to China's soft power strategy are its **cultural diplomacy** efforts, which are deeply informed by the country's traditional philosophical traditions—**Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism**. These philosophies contribute to China's cultural appeal, moral leadership, and diplomatic interactions.

**Confucianism** plays a significant role in shaping China's cultural diplomacy. Confucian values of social harmony, moral governance, and the importance of education form the foundation of China's **Confucius Institutes**, which aim to promote Chinese culture and language worldwide. Confucianism's emphasis on benevolent leadership and respect for hierarchy aligns with China's efforts to present itself as a morally upright and stable global power. These cultural and educational programs highlight China's belief in the importance of long-term relationships based on mutual respect, aligning with Confucian ideals of harmonious interaction. As noted by scholars such as **Kuan (2015)**, Confucius Institutes act as "soft power vehicles" for China, fostering cultural exchange and cultivating future global leaders sympathetic to China's political and cultural values.

#### **Influence on China's Foreign Policy**

China's traditional philosophical principles—**Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism**—have a profound impact on the country's foreign policy, especially in areas such as **human rights, trade agreements, and territorial disputes**.

**Human Rights:** China's approach to human rights is largely shaped by Confucianism's emphasis on social harmony and order. Confucian thought prioritizes the collective well-being of society over individual rights, which often leads China to downplay individual freedoms in favor of **economic growth, social stability, and national unity**. This approach contrasts with Western liberal democracies, which emphasize individual rights and freedoms as fundamental values. As **Kuan (2015)** notes, while Western nations often criticize China's human rights record, particularly regarding freedom of expression and political participation, China justifies its policies as being in line with Confucian ideals of social harmony and governance for the collective good. This philosophical

divergence creates tension in China's relationships with the West, particularly in the United Nations and other international forums where human rights are often a point of contention.

**Territorial Disputes:** Legalism's emphasis on **law, state control, and order** is particularly influential in China's approach to **territorial disputes**. The most prominent example is China's stance on the **South China Sea**, where it asserts **historical claims** based on **legal documents** and international treaties. Despite opposition from neighboring countries and international legal rulings, China continues to assert its territorial claims, arguing that its sovereignty is protected by both historical precedent and modern legal principles. This stance reflects the Legalist tradition's focus on **state power** and **legal authority**, where national interests and territorial integrity are paramount, regardless of external pressures (Zhao, 2017). Similarly, China's refusal to accept international arbitration decisions, such as the 2016 **International Court of Arbitration ruling** that rejected China's claims in the South China Sea, further underscores the Legalist emphasis on **state sovereignty** and **legal self-determination**.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Summary of Key Findings

This paper has examined the profound influence of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism on China's political culture, governance style, and international relations. These three philosophical traditions have shaped China's approach to leadership, governance, and diplomacy, creating a unique political system that emphasizes stability, order, and state control while integrating ethical principles, flexibility, and respect for hierarchy.

Confucianism has been central in shaping China's political culture, particularly its emphasis on social harmony, hierarchical relationships, and moral governance. The Confucian ideal of the ruler as a moral exemplar continues to inform China's expectations of leadership, where stability and legitimacy are derived from the moral integrity of the ruler. This influence is visible in China's modern governance, especially in its emphasis on long-term planning, collective welfare, and the moral responsibility of leadership.

Taoism, with its principles of balance, non-interference, and simplicity, has contributed to China's approach to governance by promoting a more passive, flexible leadership style. This Taoist influence is evident in China's diplomatic strategy, particularly in its non-interventionist foreign policy, which prioritizes respect for sovereignty and peaceful coexistence. The Taoist principle of *wu wei* (non-action) aligns with China's preference for diplomatic rather than military solutions to global challenges, emphasizing harmony and mutual benefit.

Legalism, focusing on law, state control, and centralized power, has played a significant role in China's governance system, particularly in terms of maintaining order, authority, and sovereignty. The Legalist emphasis on strict laws and the centralization of power has had lasting implications for China's authoritarian political structure and its approach to territorial disputes, national security, and the protection of its interests. This influence is particularly visible in China's assertive stance on issues like the South China Sea and its commitment to upholding sovereignty through both legal and strategic means.

The synthesis of these three philosophical traditions in contemporary China has created a hybrid political culture that values both control and flexibility, stability and adaptability. Modern Chinese leadership, particularly under Xi Jinping, embodies this synthesis, combining Confucian ideals of moral leadership with Taoist ideas of restraint and Legalist principles of centralized authority. These philosophical influences have allowed China to navigate complex global challenges, shaping both its domestic governance and foreign diplomacy in ways that reflect the unique values and historical experiences of Chinese civilization.

### **Implications for Global Politics**

The synthesis of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism in China's political system offers an alternative to Western political ideologies, which often prioritize democracy, individual rights, and free markets. While Western systems emphasize individual freedom and liberal democracy, China's philosophical traditions reflect a collectivist approach to governance, focusing on the common good, social stability, and state authority.

In global politics, China's philosophical blend has important implications for its foreign policy and its role in international organizations. Confucianism's focus on hierarchical relationships and moral governance is evident in China's approach to regional diplomacy, where it maintains a dominant position in East Asia and emphasizes long-term stability in its relationships. Taoism's influence on non-interference and balance underpins China's stance on sovereignty and its preference for diplomatic engagement over military intervention, especially in its relations with developing nations in Africa and Southeast Asia. Legalism's emphasis on sovereignty, national security, and strict enforcement of state laws influences China's approach to territorial disputes and international trade agreements.

China's philosophical traditions provide an alternative model of governance that contrasts with the liberal, democratic values of the West. While Western powers often emphasize human rights, political freedoms, and individual autonomy, China's model highlights the importance of social stability, order, and long-term planning. This alternative system has implications for global political culture, as China's rise challenges the traditional dominance of Western political ideologies and offers a model of governance based on state strength, cultural values, and a collectivist approach to international relations.

### **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

While this paper has provided an overview of the impact of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism on China's political culture, several avenues for future research remain. Further exploration is needed into the evolution of these philosophies in the context of modern China. As China continues to assert its global influence, it would be valuable to examine how its traditional philosophical foundations evolve in response to globalization, technological advancements, and domestic challenges.

Regional studies could also provide insights into how China's philosophical traditions shape its relationships with specific regions. For

example, how do Confucian, Taoist, and Legalist ideas influence China's diplomatic strategies in Africa, Latin America, or Central Asia? These regions, with their varied cultural and political landscapes, provide fertile ground for studying the practical application of Chinese philosophy in different international contexts.

Additionally, future research could focus on China's evolving role in international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund. How do China's philosophical values shape its participation in global governance, especially in comparison with Western powers? This could include examining China's approach to global environmental governance, human rights, and global security, where its philosophical foundation may offer an alternative to Western-centric approaches.

Finally, it would be beneficial to explore the role of philosophical education in shaping the next generation of Chinese leaders. How are Confucian, Taoist, and Legalist ideas taught to future policymakers and diplomats, and how do these teachings influence China's domestic and foreign policy?

In conclusion, Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism have profoundly shaped China's political culture and governance style, both historically and in the modern era. These philosophical traditions, while distinct, are not mutually exclusive but coexist in a hybrid political culture that balances state control with flexibility, authority with restraint. The synthesis of these philosophies informs China's domestic governance and foreign policy, providing a unique model of political organization that contrasts with Western liberal democracies. As China continues to rise as a global power, understanding the philosophical foundations of its political system is essential for engaging with the country and understanding its role in global politics. Future research into the evolving role of these philosophies will be crucial for understanding China's position in the 21st century and its impact on global political dynamics.

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