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Introduction

A REALIST POLITICAL THEORY FOR CHINA

IN THE SUMMER OF 2024, I embarked on a journey through the Dongbei Provinces—China's northeast, historically known as Manchuria. The high-speed rail network made it easy to glide from city to city in comfort. But one leg of my trip took me off the modern grid: I planned to visit a Liao Dynasty Buddhist temple in a remote county, reachable only by a slow, regular-speed train that connects small towns and county seats across the region.

I boarded at a station in the Qinhuangdao area, a coastal enclave long used as the Communist Party's summer retreat—a kind of political backyard to Beijing. The security checks were surprisingly stringent, even by Chinese standards. After passing through the usual procedures—having my belongings screened, scanning my ID at the gate, and undergoing facial recognition—I was stopped again. Two uniformed policemen scanned my ID a second time with handheld devices. Only after a green checkmark appeared on their screen was I cleared to board.

Since it was a short ride, I had booked a seat in a standard seating car. These cars are communal by design: four to six passengers share booth-like sections, seated knee-to-knee around a narrow table. This setup creates an ideal social environment where casual conversations often emerge. Here, one encounters a different China—less polished, less affluent, and more raw. It was an unexpected chance for some impromptu fieldwork on the ground-level realities of Chinese society.

Shortly after the train departed, my fellow passengers—three others sharing my booth—began complaining about the security checks. As locals, they suggested the reason behind the heightened scrutiny: senior party leaders were vacationing nearby, and the extra ID screening was intended to identify and intercept petitioners (*shangfanghu*, 上访户), citizens seeking to lodge formal complaints against local authorities through the state's Letters and Visits (*xinfang*, 信访) system. Each year, local officials go to great lengths to prevent these

"troublemakers," who come from all different places but especially northern China, from spoiling the leadership's holiday.

This sparked a wave of frustrated stories from two of my companions—a man and a woman, both in their late fifties or early sixties. Each had been a seasoned petitioner, now disillusioned. The man, an army veteran whose labor rights had been trampled by a local employer, had spent eight years filing complaints after receiving no help from local officials. Instead of justice, he encountered relentless political harassment that left lasting psychological scars. The woman recounted an equally harrowing ordeal: after her husband's death, local authorities denied her and her son the pension they were legally entitled to. When she persisted, officials retaliated—going so far as to frame her son and have him imprisoned.

Their mood was grim. They had tried everything, but the machinery of government proved impermeable. At the peak of their conversation, the woman—a small-town shopkeeper without formal education—said with striking clarity: "Look at the United States. They have two parties. We only have one. We have no way to resist." The man nodded in agreement and added that, for people like them, the only sane path forward was to give up hope and practice carpe diem.

The woman's remark about the American political system would likely provoke pushback from many in the United States—progressives, moderates, and conservatives alike. After all, criticisms abound that, despite having two major parties, the American political system largely serves the interests of the wealthy while neglecting those of the poor. With deepening polarization, the two-party system often produces gridlock, preventing meaningful legislation from advancing. On the surface, the United States remains a competitive electoral democracy; in essence, many argue, it functions as an oligarchic dictatorship. Voters do not so much support a party out of conviction as they vote out of disillusionment about the incumbent. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), long armed with the ideological tools of Marxism, has echoed these critiques to defend the superiority of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In November 2024, the reelection of Donald Trump brought the crisis of American democracy into sharp relief. In the early months of his second term, it appears that Trump and the Republican Party are poised to dismantle what remains of America's democratic institutions. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, demoralized by a devastating defeat, has shown little resolve in resisting this authoritarian turn. As the United States falters, American intellectuals look toward China with a mix of anxiety and admiration. "I just saw the future. It was not in America," wrote Thomas Friedman in a recent *New York Times* op-ed.[1] While he stops short of endorsing the Chinese political system, his words suggest a growing recognition that the CCP, unencumbered by electoral

cycles, is, at least in some respects, better positioned to make long-term strategic decisions. According to Friedman, as American politicians remain mired in partisan squabbles, the Chinese state is expanding its investment in higher education and technological innovation. As one of world's biggest countries in terms of territory, population, economic size, and global influence, China seems to represent a story of "authoritarian success": it demonstrates the capacity of a non-electoral regime to enhance the prosperity of its citizens, foster a dynamic society, and fortify its national prowess.

Yes, we have entered a historical moment in which any serious discussion of humanity's political future must confront the rise of China. The competition between China and the North Atlantic West is not merely about geopolitics or economics. At its core, it concerns a deeper theoretical question that has animated every generation in human history: Which political system is better equipped to meet the most pressing challenges of our world? China has emerged as a formidable contender in this debate. Yet the track record of its current political system cautions against any quick or uncritical affirmation of its supposed superiority over liberal democracy. Over the past decade, both China and the West have experienced moments of brilliance and of failure. In this ongoing contest, partisans on each side often take comfort in the shortcomings of their rivals. But history has not yet declared a winner.

Take the COVID-19 pandemic, for example. When the outbreak began in Wuhan, the initial cover-up, suppression of medical professionals, and chaos of the early lockdown were widely interpreted as the Chinese regime's "Chernobyl Moment."[2] Yet soon after, China's draconian containment measures were hailed as a demonstration of state capacity, especially when compared to the Trump administration's chaotic and politicized response to the crisis.[3] Two years later, however, with the arrival of the Omicron variant, China's refusal to lift its zero-COVID policy sparked immense public suffering—most notably during the 2022 Shanghai lockdown—and ultimately led to the White Paper Protests demanding political change.[4] Today, while the Chinese government may appear more professional in its policymaking than the second Trump administration, the Chinese people continue to suffer from an economic slowdown exacerbated by years of strict pandemic restrictions.

China's pandemic response—marked by both remarkable achievements and profound failures—has underscored the ongoing need for political reform, even as Xi Jinping's consolidation of power since 2012 has suppressed reformist voices that once thrived in the post-Mao era. During a period of relative openness in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese intellectuals, though divided in outlook, broadly agreed on the need for reforms to enhance routinization, institutionalization, professionalization, and even limited democratization of the political system. There was a shared belief that ordinary citizens should

have some say in governance; that the bureaucracy should be staffed by competent professionals; that leadership succession should be institutionalized; and that the exercise of political power must be restrained by law and constitutional norms. Whether such reforms would ultimately converge with liberal democracy remained an open question—but the consensus was clear: The Chinese political system needed change.

In this context, a noteworthy group of reform proponents has emerged, what I call the political theorists of the "China Model." Unlike the woman on the train, who seemed to suggest a wholesale rejection of the current system, these theorists aim to synthesize what they see as the strengths of both China and the West. Their project envisions a political structure that retains one-party rule while expanding freedom of speech, strengthening adherence to the rule of law, and widening avenues for political consultation, all without granting citizens the right to choose their leaders through competitive multiparty elections. In the absence of electoral accountability, they argue, power can still be checked through the virtue and competence of ruling elites, selected through rigorous meritocratic procedures and instilled with a strong sense of responsibility. These ideas, they claim, are not only functionally viable but also culturally legitimate, grounded in China's Confucian and/or socialist traditions.

This book enters—and extends—the ongoing debate about the normative foundations of China's political future, a debate increasingly constrained within mainland China. At its heart lies a core question: Can China's traditions and contemporary realities yield a legitimate and desirable alternative to liberal constitutional democracy, an ideal born in the West but now globally practiced in various forms?

Against the backdrop of China Model theories, my aim is to affirm the insight of the woman I met on the train—not her endorsement of American democracy as it exists, but her yearning for the ideals behind modern constitutional democracy. I argue that constitutional democracy helps decentralize power, constrain the state, protect political freedoms, and promote genuine political competition. It offers the best available response to a defining normative crisis in contemporary China: the unchecked domination of the party-state over ordinary citizens. Crucially, I argue that realizing constitutional democracy in China would require the eventual cessation of one-party rule and the introduction of competitive elections, and that certain meritocratic and socialist ideals stand a better chance of realization within the framework of constitutional democracy. Most importantly, I seek to advance a counter-intuitive claim: that constitutional democracy is not a laughable fantasy for China but a realistic path forward, whereas the China Model, often portrayed as the only realistic option, ultimately fails when judged by a richer, more multidimensional understanding of political realism.

In this introduction, I illustrate key methodological features of my realist approach to political theorizing in the Chinese context. I begin by challenging two common assumptions often held by realists in China-related political thought: first, that any normative theory for China must be tightly constrained by feasibility considerations; and second, that such a theory must be rooted in its Confucian tradition. In contrast, I offer an alternative conception of political realism that informs both my critique of the so-called China Model and my defense of constitutional democracy. This approach begins with a diagnosis of the institutional and moral pathologies of contemporary China and treats normative ideas as practical prescriptions for addressing these failures.

Political realism has deep roots in both Western and Chinese traditions. In contemporary Anglophone philosophy, systematic discussion of realism began with Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss, and has since been expanded by political theorists working within the analytic tradition. Alison McQueen characterizes political realism as "a family of approaches" united by four core claims: (a) the distinctiveness or autonomy of politics; (b) the centrality of conflict, disagreement, and power in politics; (c) a rejection of utopian or moralistic theories like that of Rawls; and (d) the prioritization of political order and stability over justice.[5] My book does not aim to participate in these largely abstract, and often metaphysical, debates about the nature of political realism. Instead, guided by a contextualist sensibility central to many realist approaches, I treat both political actors and political theorists as "historically situated agents who are responding to and constrained by the social, institutional, and intellectual contexts of their times."[6] This commitment informs my development of a China-specific political theory, one that responds directly to contemporary challenges without aspiring to offer a comprehensive or superior account of political realism, of which there is already no shortage.

The Tyranny of Feasibility

"I am not usually inclined to endorse discussion of Chinese democratization, because it seems to me that such a change is likely far from happening and may not happen at all," states the late Joseph Fewsmith, a distinguished scholar of Chinese politics at Boston University, in his review of Jiwei Ci's 2019 book *Democracy in China: The Coming Crisis*.[7] Ci's book, which has garnered significant attention and sparked intense debates, argues that for the long-term stability of the CCP regime, the CCP should introduce democracy to China. This argument is primarily rooted in empirical evidence showing that economic and social modernization over the past decades has fundamentally altered China's social structure, leading to what Alexis de Tocqueville termed "the equality of conditions." Ci contends that this societal transformation will

inevitably lead ordinary people to challenge authoritarian rule and demand democratization. Rather than resist this trend through repression, he urges the CCP to guide the transition incrementally and prudently.

What makes Ci's argument unconvincing, according to Fewsmith, is that "there is a sense of optimism running through it that I am afraid I cannot share."[8] Historically speaking, for example, the lack of *pouvoirs intermédiare* in imperial China and the persistent underdevelopment of civil society associations in modern China make the establishment of democratic participation and political representation exceedingly challenging, if not outright impossible.[9] In addition, Fewsmith argues that throughout modern Chinese history, political disputes have typically been resolved through complete victory for one side, as opposed to political compromise. It is therefore unlikely that "the political actors who might be unleashed by any collapse of the CCP" would "really turn to the ballot box as Professor Ci hopes."[10] For Fewsmith, the preconditions for democratic politics simply do not exist in contemporary China.

Ci and Fewsmith come from markedly different intellectual traditions. While the former is a rigorous political philosopher committed to theorizing ideals, the latter was an empirical political scientist working within the Weberian tradition of "value-free" social science, typically steering clear of normative inquiry. And yet, in formulating what he calls a "prudential" case for democratization, Ci moves closer to Fewsmith's terrain. Rather than defend democracy on moral or philosophical grounds alone, Ci situates his argument in China's evolving political realities. Despite their disagreements, both scholars now converge on a foundational assumption: that normative ideals are worth pursuing only when the social and political conditions for their realization have sufficiently matured. For them, democracy becomes a meaningful goal for China only when it becomes feasible. In this sense, both Ci and Fewsmith can be described as political realists.

In everyday political discourse, "realist sensibility" is often associated with our judgment about the likelihood of an ideal being realized in the world. To be a political realist, in this sense, means distancing oneself from political ideals, however compelling, that do not meet a threshold of feasibility. "Feasibility constraints," or the total set of historical conditions enabling the realization of political ideals, are thus treated as hard boundaries, warning against the pursuit of ideas deemed "ahead of their time." Realists who emphasize feasibility are not opposed to normative thinking per se, but they regard desirability as strongly conditioned by judgments of what is feasible.

This realist sensibility partly explains why the field of "normative political theory for contemporary China" remains underdeveloped. Scholarly attention has largely focused on analyzing China's "political realities." In Anglophone

academia, for example, a proliferation of empirical studies on Chinese politics and society over recent decades has not been accompanied by a corresponding surge in normative theorizing about China's political future.[11] While we now better understand how the one-party regime operates through both repression and responsiveness,[12] whether social welfare distribution enhances regime support,[13] whether civil society challenges or consolidates party rule,[14] how propaganda and censorship shape political behavior,[15] and how center-local relations affect the party-state's capacity to maintain stability,[16] relatively little has been written about questions like whether China needs democracy, what kind of democracy it should adopt, and how such a transition might occur.[17]

In Sinophone academia, where scholars often straddle empirical and normative approaches more fluidly, there is a stronger, but uneven, interest in normative questions. This interest tends to fluctuate with cycles of political repression and relaxation. Still, even in moments when strong censorship is not present, feasibility considerations tend to dominate ideal-oriented discourse. Following the May Fourth Movement's radical rejection of tradition, the Maoist era's pursuit of utopia at catastrophic human cost, and the Tiananmen protesters' impassioned demand for Western-style democracy, post-Tiananmen China witnessed what Els van Dongen calls a "realistic revolution" among Chinese intellectuals.[18] This revolution replaced the revolutionary radicalism that defined much of twentieth-century China with a prevailing sense of realism, and even conservatism, across the ideological spectrum. In contrast to Maoist voluntarism, which largely ignored constraints such as human nature, historical development, and material resources, this new realism insists that political ideals must submit to feasibility constraints. While this correction to earlier radicalism is both necessary and valuable, it has also contributed to an intellectual climate that treats feasibility as a kind of dogma: if a political theory strays too far from perceived realities, it is often dismissed as unworthy of serious engagement.

In contrast, studies of Western democratic politics have witnessed a proliferation of both empirical and normative works. Although political science remains largely dominated by empiricists employing quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze political phenomena, normative political theorists and philosophers have engaged in equally, if not more, vibrant debates on how to reform or even transcend the existing liberal democratic order.[19] These theorists have proposed a wide range of institutional reforms to address pressing challenges such as socioeconomic inequality, unequal political participation and representation, polarization, the decline of traditional parties, the spread of disinformation and misinformation in the digital age, the growth of the administrative state, and the persistence of racism, sexism, and classism. Their proposals span from strengthening traditional democratic institutions

like voting and political parties to creating new ones such as deliberative mini-publics and citizens' assemblies.[20]

Importantly, these debates about institutional reform are closely intertwined with methodological debates, particularly over the extent to which normative theorizing should be constrained by real-world considerations.[21] So-called "ideal theorists" argue that practical political issues should be addressed through the application of pre-established moral principles or a systematic theory of justice, thereby elevating day-to-day politics into the domain of robust philosophical reasoning.[22] By contrast, political realists contend that such abstract theorizing has limited utility for guiding actual political reform because it is too detached from political realities and insufficiently attentive to feasibility constraints.[23] Realists are often accused by idealists of being conservative defenders of the status quo, while idealists are dismissed by realists as irrelevant armchair philosophers.

This contrast between the flourishing of normative theory in Western democratic contexts and its relative absence in Chinese studies underscores a deeper disparity: while feasibility is not generally treated as a necessary constraint in Western political theory, it often functions as a tyrannical limit for scholars working on China. My intention is not to suggest that purely ideal theories should be developed for China. Rather, the state of Western democratic theory suggests that feasibility constraints in Chinese political discourse may have become overly dominant: stifling not just impractical utopias, but also the imaginative capacity to envision plausible and desirable alternatives for China's political future.

The normative theories of the China Model, which serves as my primary intellectual interlocutor in this book, emerge directly from the feasibility-first mindset that dominates Chinese political thought. From their perspective, since no credible alternative force exists to replace the CCP in the event of a democratic transition, and given the party's perceived role in maintaining social stability and prosperity, the optimal future for China lies in preserving one-party leadership while expanding limited forms of popular participation. What distinguishes China Model theorists most clearly is their firm opposition to introducing competitive elections into the political system. Even those who favor competitive elections, however, generally assume that such reforms must be initiated and managed from the top down. The prevailing belief is that electoral mechanisms, if carefully introduced, would ultimately strengthen, rather than weaken, the CCP's authority. Jiwei Ci's *Democracy in China* serves as a prominent illustration of this line of reasoning.

Yet political theory, even in its realist forms, is inherently a future-oriented endeavor. To be dominated by a feasibility-first mindset risks reducing political theory to the logic of public policy. While public policy focuses on options that

can be implemented within the constraints of the here and now, political theory prepares the intellectual ground for possibilities that may only become viable in the long term. This book represents an experiment in political theorizing that seeks to resist the tyranny of feasibility in Chinese political thought while remaining grounded in political reality. I advocate for a constitutional democracy that would bring an end to one-party rule, not because I believe such a transformation is imminent, but because I believe it is necessary. My defense of this ideal is rooted not in abstract philosophical commitments but in a thorough analysis of China's political dynamics, its moral and institutional shortcomings, and cross-national comparisons of democratic and authoritarian regimes. In this sense, my approach does not reflect an "ideal theory" built on a decontextualized philosophy of justice. Rather, it exemplifies what I argue is a realist form of political theory, one that engages seriously with the world as it is, but refuses to let feasibility alone dictate the boundaries of political imagination.

Political realism, therefore, must attend to the feasible without becoming its captive. How to strike this balance is a question I will revisit later in this chapter and develop further throughout this book.

The Tyranny of Confucianism

Having addressed the tyranny of feasibility—the notion that ideals must be judged primarily by their immediate practicability—I turn now to a second, closely related constraint: the tyranny of Confucianism. A widely held assumption, particularly prevalent in the Anglophone world but also influential within China, holds that any contextualist and hence realist political theory for contemporary China must be grounded in its Confucian heritage. Given the profound role Confucianism has played in shaping Chinese civilization, it is understandable why many equate Chinese political thought with Confucian political theory. Yet, to situate my project more precisely within contemporary debates about China and East Asia, it is important to distinguish clearly between these two domains.

Chinese political thought, in its essence, encompasses theoretical reflections on political issues within the borders of China and does not necessarily have to be Confucian. Throughout the classical period of Chinese history, the intellectual landscape was dominated by the "hundred schools," with Daoism, Legalism, and Mohism being the most prominent alongside Confucianism. Even after Confucianism attained the status of a state ideology in imperial China, other schools of thought persisted, albeit marginalized. Since the mid-nineteenth century, various schools of Western political thought, including liberalism, republicanism, anarchism, socialism, Communism, nationalism, libertarianism, communitarianism, and even social Darwinism and fascism,

have made their way to China and been integrated into political reflections on China's domestic and international affairs. Maoism, one of the most significant intellectual contributions from China to the world (like it or not) and to the tradition of Marxism, is a prime example of Chinese political thought, given that it is rooted in the Chinese experience of anti-imperialism, socialist construction, class struggle, and guerrilla war. It is in essence an anti-Confucian political theory, although scholars have argued that certain aspects of Maoism can be interpreted through the prism of Confucianism, in particular the Yangming Learning popular in the Ming and early republican periods.[24] In recent years, Ci's work, mentioned above, as well as many theories of the China Model—the primary rivals in this book—are leading examples of Chinese political thought, although some of them are offered by political thinkers strongly sympathetic to Confucianism.

Yet one could persuasively argue that, in the modern era, the most captivating and theoretically significant development in Chinese political thought is Confucian political theory. This argument rests on the recognition that while examining the adaptation of Western political philosophies in contemporary China remains crucial, it is Confucianism—and to a lesser extent, Legalism and Daoism—that offers the most distinctively "Chinese" contributions to global political theory. Although this association may strike some as essentialist, I acknowledge the underlying plausibility of conflating Confucian and Chinese political thought in this context. Still, it is important to recognize the limitations and costs of this conflation, particularly its tendency to narrow the scope of normative reflection on contemporary China.

Since the mid-nineteenth century when Western political ideas began flowing into China, the compatibility of Confucianism with constitutional democracy has remained a central theme in political debates. In recent decades, building on generations of New Confucian scholarship, Confucian political theory has established itself both as a recognized subfield within Anglophone political theory and as a prominent branch of comparative political theory. In the twenty-first century, the field has largely coalesced around the democracy-versus-meritocracy debate, namely, whether Confucianism should be reformulated to support democracy, meritocracy, or some hybrid form such as democratic meritocracy or meritocratic democracy. Within the prodemocracy camp, the Western model of electoral and representative democracy remains a key reference point.[25] However, an increasing number of scholars argue that participatory models, particularly those grounded in deliberative democracy, better resonate with Confucian values such as harmony, mutual respect, and deference.[26] On the pro-meritocracy side, Confucianism is often presented as offering one of the most philosophically robust justifications for selecting public officials based on talent, virtue, and competence rather than popular

support. Prominent theorists such as Jiang Qing, Daniel Bell, and Tongdong Bai advocate for nondemocratic mechanisms—such as examinations, performance evaluations, and plural voting—as ways to address the shortcomings of "one person, one vote" democracy.[27]

While these developments in Confucian political theory mark a significant expansion of Anglophone academic engagement with Chinese traditions, it is worth noting that not all such works exhibit a strong sense of "Chineseness" in their theoretical orientation. Despite Confucianism's indisputable Chinese origins, many contemporary Confucian political theorists frame their work in universalist rather than culturally particularist terms. Contrary to the expectation—common among Western audiences—that Confucian political theory should speak primarily to issues specific to China, many of its leading proponents treat Confucianism as a philosophical system with global relevance. For instance, as Joseph Chan argues, the development of a Confucian political theory for the modern world is no different in principle than reconstructing Kant's practical philosophy into a Kantian theory of justice, as Rawls has done.[28] Bai is even more ambitious than Chan, arguing that his "Confucian hybrid regime," derived from Mencius's political philosophy and certain historical practices in China, "is meant to be universal, applicable to any state" in modern times, and is thus distinct from "any of the so-called China models of economic development and governance."[29] Thus, the core ambition of contemporary Confucian political theory, as pursued by the scholars cited above, lies in reconstructing Confucian concepts to engage with major normative debates in Anglophone political theory, especially those concerning the strengths and weaknesses of liberal, electoral, and representative democracy.[30] Analyzing or critiquing the power structures of the present Chinese regime is not their primary concern, even though the political ideals they advance inevitably carry implications for China's potential political transformation.

Confucianism is undeniably a crucial component of Chinese political thought, but it is important to recognize that Confucianism also constitutes a shared heritage across East Asia. While mainland China underwent Mao's iconoclasm, Confucian traditions and customs persisted in other East Asian societies such as Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Contemporary Confucian political thinkers, aiming to avoid the Sinocentrism inherent in the study of Confucianism, typically opt to situate their theorizing within the broader context of "East Asia" rather than specifically within China.

For example, Sungmoon Kim, a leading figure in contemporary Anglophone studies of Confucian political theory, does not primarily construct his framework through a philosophical reconstruction of classical Confucian texts. Instead, he grounds his theorizing in the sociological reality that contemporary East Asian societies (CEASs), despite being deeply modernized,

pluralistic, and multicultural, continue to exhibit enduring Confucian features. These features persist largely because ordinary citizens remain socialized through cultural norms rooted in Confucian values, such as filial piety, ritual propriety, and mutual deference. Given this continuing influence of Confucian public culture, Kim argues that political theorists in CEASs, as engaged citizens, must formulate normative theories that enable "mutual accommodations" between value pluralism and the Confucian legacy. His proposed outcome is a Confucian constitutional democracy.[31] Drawing heavily on the case of modern South Korea, his home country, Kim advances a model he sees as particularly suited to CEASs. While he does not intend for his theory to be universally applicable like Bai, he believes that all CEASs, as sociologically Confucian societies, would find his theories desirable and practicable, albeit with necessary adjustments tailored to local conditions.

Confucian political theory in contemporary Anglophone academia, therefore, has two primary tasks: the reconstruction of Confucian concepts and teachings to develop a political theory applicable to the modern world, and the design of a normative ideal suited for East Asian societies characterized by prominent Confucian influences. While these tasks may appear similar, they employ distinct methodologies. The first, exemplified by scholars such as Angle, Chan, and Bai, centers on close textual engagement and interpretive reconstruction of the Confucian canon. The second, as typified by Kim, draws more heavily on sociological or anthropological observations—focusing on the values, behaviors, and preferences of people in contemporary East Asian societies—and less on philosophical exegesis. The former continues and updates a historical intellectual tradition; the latter grounds normative theorizing in evolving social realities.

In contrast, my book is not another contribution to Confucian political theory, but rather a political theory explicitly tailored to the contemporary Chinese context. Its central aim is to address pressing questions about the fate of the Leninist political system in a partially marketized China: Should this system be preserved, reformed, or replaced? While many Confucian theorists maintain that Confucianism offers the most appropriate intellectual resources for addressing China's current political dilemmas, including the legitimacy crisis of the CCP in the aftermath of Maoism,[32] this book proceeds from a different assumption. My approach does not reject Confucianism because it is irrelevant, but because I question the idea that any single philosophical tradition can singularly resolve China's complex political challenges.

Developing Confucianism into a viable modern political philosophy typically involves meeting two simultaneous requirements. Firstly, Confucianism must be adapted to modern conditions. Secondly, any modernized version

must still retain a "recognizably Confucian character."[33] While the first requirement allows Confucian thinkers the flexibility to innovate, the second imposes limits on these innovations. Debates within contemporary Confucian political theory often revolve around these dual concerns: Is democracy desirable, and would its incorporation into Confucianism compromise the latter's core tenets? In fact, prodemocracy Confucians, most notably Angle and Chan, have been repeatedly pressed by their critics to demonstrate that their justification of democracy is not based on a mere cherry-picking of Confucian doctrines according to our modern and even Western biases.[34] As Confucians, they are obliged to respond to such challenges by engaging in intramural debates based on textual interpretation, as demonstrating faithfulness to the tradition is implied in their philosophical approach.

I do not intend to dismiss the value of these internal Confucian debates. Yet when it comes to addressing the specific political realities of contemporary China, their relevance may be limited.[35] If it were conclusively shown that Confucianism and democracy are incompatible, a Confucian democrat would face a deep philosophical impasse. A non-Confucian democrat, by contrast, could simply maintain that democracy offers the most compelling normative and practical response to China's current political predicament, regardless of its congruence with Confucian teachings. Given that Confucianism no longer holds authoritative status in China, political theorists are not bound to frame their normative arguments within its tradition.

In crafting a political theory tailored to contemporary China, my approach also diverges significantly from the strand of contemporary Confucian political theory exemplified by Kim. Whereas Kim groups all East Asian societies together on account of their shared Confucian heritage, my book focuses on China specifically and underscores its distinctiveness compared to other East Asian societies, as well as to societies worldwide. Although it is plausible to argue that the CEASs, or the Sinosphere—encompassing mainland China, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and to some extent Japan—share a cultural legacy that is unmistakably Confucian, collapsing these societies into a single analytical category risks obscuring their profound differences, particularly those shaped by divergent experiences of modernization, colonialism, and political development.

East Asia exhibits a striking diversity of regime types and historical trajectories. China and Vietnam remain under the rule of Leninist vanguard parties; Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan function as consolidated democracies; Singapore operates as a soft authoritarian state; Hong Kong, before the national security law, maintained a semi-democratic system; and North Korea persists as a totalitarian monarchy. Their colonial pasts also vary: Korea and Taiwan were colonized by Japan, Vietnam by France, Hong Kong and Singapore

by Britain, while China—despite suffering immense pressure from imperialist powers—retained nominal sovereignty and a remarkable degree of self-reliance. Politically, while all CEASs have experienced authoritarianism, China stands apart for its radical embrace of mass social transformation. Unlike Taiwan under the KMT or postwar South Korea under military rule, both focused on rapid modernization, Maoist China embarked on an unprecedented project to revolutionize society at its core, reshaping not only institutions but people themselves.[36]

The question of whether political institutions and social structures, on the one hand, or cultural factors, on the other, determine political behavior has long been debated in political science, including studies of Chinese politics.[37] While my book does not attempt to settle this complex issue, it insists on one critical point: prioritizing culture, specifically Confucian culture, at the expense of institutional and structural analysis risks mischaracterizing China's unique political challenges. In this book, I aim to recenter state power, political institutions, and social structures in normative political reflections within a non-Western context. I argue that China presents an important context for political theorizing not only because of its Confucian or other cultural heritage but also due to its existing political system and recent history. These factors compel us to contemplate, more broadly, the promises and perils of the modern state, which possesses the full capacity to shape political behavior and even cultural inheritance itself.[38]

Viewed through the lens of the modern state, China stands apart not only from other CEASs but also from many major societies worldwide. In contrast to Soviet countries, where planned economies led to the stagnation of social development, China's embrace and harnessing of the market economy have fostered prosperity and vibrancy. Unlike most postcolonial nations, whose development remains constrained by dependence on Western powers, China has emerged as a relatively autonomous economic hub and influential player in global politics, even being accused of neo-colonialism. Unlike many dictatorships struggling to maintain control, the CCP's wealth, technological prowess, and organizational structure afford it systematic domination over civil society and the populace.

China's story, then, is above all a story about the modern state—its reach, its ambitions, its transformative capacity, and its darker consequences. To confine political theorizing on China to the Confucian tradition is to neglect this fundamental aspect of its modern political experience. The theory of constitutional democracy advanced in this book, therefore, aims to challenge the common yet underexamined assumption that a context-sensitive and realist political theory for China must be rooted in Confucianism.

A Diagnostic Political Theory

If my theory seeks to loosen feasibility constraints and distance itself from Confucianism, what kind of realism does it commit to?

To count as realist, a political theory must remain substantively engaged with political reality. Unlike utopian, idealist, or moralistic approaches, which often treat political theory as a branch of applied ethics, political realism begins normative reflection from within the concrete practices of political life, attending to their social meanings, advantages, and limitations. Distinct from empirical political science, which aims to understand political phenomena, realist political theory aspires to improve them. To avoid lapsing into a mere defense of the status quo, it identifies desirable possibilities that could transform existing conditions we find unsatisfactory. I call this orientation "diagnostic political theory," a label that captures the methodological commitments underlying my approach.[39]

Diagnostic political theory is not new. It can be argued that many important works in the history of political thought have practiced this approach in one way or another.[40] As Hans Sluga notes, this mode of theorizing tends to focus on the present rather than on timeless abstractions, remains attentive to its own historical situation, seeks proximity to political practice, and privileges concrete choices over universal moral principles.[41] In this framework, political theorizing begins where the political community exhibits symptoms of dysfunction—symptoms analogous to a patient's fatigue, insomnia, or persistent headache, as Elizabeth Anderson vividly puts it.[42] The theorist, like a medical doctor, then investigates the underlying causes of these symptoms by conducting an empirical inquiry into the structures and dynamics of power in the community. Through this pathological engagement with reality, the theorist formulates normative prescriptions—ideals that do not simply critique the present but offer direction for political recovery and renewal.

One challenge facing the diagnostic approach in political theorizing is that, unlike in medicine, diagnosing the health of a political community, or "body politic," is significantly more complex. While some political pathologies, such as widespread poverty or genocide, are uncontroversial, many others are subject to competing interpretations. What counts as a "normal condition" in one society may be regarded as pathological in another, depending on the evaluative framework employed. A hierarchical society may seem deeply flawed to an egalitarian for denying equal dignity, while from a traditionalist perspective, an egalitarian society may appear disordered for failing to cultivate noble virtues. Diagnosis, in this sense, is never value-neutral; it may have to presuppose an evaluative lens grounded in a set of "master concepts."

By "master concept," I mean a notion that is widely used within a society as a foundational reference point for moral and political evaluation. Although there may be ongoing disagreement over how such concepts should be defined or applied, they remain indispensable for articulating and debating core ethical and political issues. Their prominence in both public and philosophical discourse reflects their embeddedness in the society's social imaginary, understood, following Charles Taylor, as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations."[43]

It follows, then, that a realist and context-sensitive political theorist engaged in diagnostic critique should primarily draw on the social imaginary shaped by local values, rather than importing evaluative frameworks from foreign contexts. This method, often described as internal critique, helps guard against one of the most enduring dangers in modern history: imperialism.[44] Theorists of the China Model, to their credit, adopt a realist methodology in response to this concern, and my book takes a similar approach.

As a result, much of the normative theorizing developed in the Western analytic tradition—whether in the form of ideal theories of justice, equality, and freedom, or in nonideal theories that nonetheless assume the primacy of values like inalienable rights or personal autonomy (as exemplified by Rawls)—has limited relevance for China. These theories emerge from a social context where such values are already deeply entrenched as master concepts, shaping how people understand themselves and their society. A realist political theorist asking whether China needs democracy, therefore, cannot simply rely on the social imaginary of liberal democracies to make normative claims.

Many Chinese liberals tend to interpret and critique the political pathologies of contemporary China through distinctively liberal master concepts.[45] While these critiques are often incisive and well-reasoned, they are frequently dismissed as instances of external critique. Yet a political theorist working within the Chinese context need not rely on liberal concepts to diagnose and evaluate political problems. This is because individuals are capable of moving between different evaluative frameworks. While a society may have an overarching social imaginary—such as the liberal or Confucian constellation of values and principles—that guides public discourse, it is a mistake to assume this is the sole source of people's everyday moral reflection or political judgment. In many cases, experiences of suffering and injustice are first registered through immediate, personal perceptions, what we might call thinly theorized values. These include the desire for better living conditions, the expectation of peace and stability, or the demand for redress when wronged. Such values do

not necessarily depend on a society's dominant master concepts; their normative weight arises from the immediacy of lived experience and the intuitive sense that something is unjust or unacceptable. When individuals seek to articulate these experiences in the public sphere or press their demands more effectively, they may turn to established master concepts to enhance moral clarity or social resonance. But this is typically a secondary move. For this reason, even in the absence of a robust liberal social imaginary, particularly one anchored in freedom and equality, a meaningful critique of China's political system, especially its repressive dimensions, can be grounded in the thinly theorized values shared by ordinary people. It would take either a staunch cultural relativist or a diehard CCP ideologue to claim that only citizens brainwashed by Western liberal values find the state's overreach problematic.

There is another important reason to rely on thinly theorized values when conducting internal critique in China. Because such values already play a central role in how people interpret and evaluate their everyday circumstances, they become especially important in moments when a society's traditional social imaginary has fractured. In periods of rapid modernization, the traditional moral framework may have lost its grip on the collective imagination, while a new framework may still be struggling to gain widespread traction. In this transitional moment, it is prudent for a realist political theorist to ground normative claims in the thinly theorized values that resonate with the lived experience of ordinary people, even if these values may appear philosophically underdeveloped or incomplete. This is precisely the situation in contemporary China: the Confucian social imaginary that once underpinned Chinese society has largely collapsed, while liberal or democratic ideals have not yet taken root beyond the educated urban class. The diagnostic approach to political theorizing adopted in this book aspires to show how these thinly theorized values can serve as a foundation for ordinary people to evaluate their circumstances, make sense of their hardships, and envision alternative political arrangements as practical remedies for the problems they face.

In this book, I treat both the China Model and my defense of constitutional democracy as exercises in diagnostic political theory. Each aims to confront important political problems in contemporary China and to envision institutional reforms that could improve the health of its political community. Both engage in an analysis of the distribution and dynamics of power, state and non-state, within the Chinese political system. Both articulate normative ideals intended as practical remedies to real political challenges. The China Model—a hybrid of uncompetitive one-party rule and selective democratic mechanisms—and my proposal of constitutional democracy as an alternative to one-party rule are, in this sense, competing diagnoses and prescriptions.

The normative advantage of my theory, as I will argue, rests on its superior diagnostic power.

A central moral pathology of Chinese political life, I contend, is the party-state's pervasive domination over ordinary people. This domination is not primarily objectionable because it violates abstract liberal principles such as inalienable rights, personal autonomy, or equal liberty. Rather, it is troubling because it undermines the thinly theorized values that many ordinary Chinese citizens have come to hold during the Reform Era: the expectation that life can be improved through one's own efforts in a stable and peaceful social environment. Instead of supporting these aspirations, state domination instills a widespread sense of insecurity and uncertainty. It creates a political climate in which today's modest gains may be forcibly retracted by the state tomorrow, an experience vividly recalled during the zero-COVID years. Constitutional democracy, as I argue, is a political arrangement capable of responding to this condition. By deconcentrating state power and enabling ordinary people to hold it accountable, constitutional democracy offers an institutional solution to the moral and practical harms of state domination. It also has the potential to address other systemic problems, including socioeconomic inequality and ineffective governance.

Proponents of the China Model similarly acknowledge the dangers of unchecked state power. However, their solution—to introduce democratic mechanisms within an uncompetitive one-party framework—falls short not because of flawed intentions, but due to an inadequate diagnosis. They fail to grapple sufficiently with the structural features of China's Leninist political system and the deeper logic of state-society relations. As a result, they place undue faith in the party's willingness to share power with ordinary citizens. Even if partial power-sharing were to occur, the arrangement remains precarious, as the party retains the unilateral authority to withdraw or suppress democratic participation at will. Moreover, advocates of the China Model overstate the meritocratic nature of the party-state and underestimate the role that constitutional democracy could play in improving governance quality in China.

Ultimately, diagnostic political theory seeks to bridge the divide between normative theory and empirical analysis in contemporary political science. It demonstrates that normative reflection can be deepened not only through rigorous philosophical reasoning but also through sustained engagement with empirical realities. A distinctive contribution of this book, therefore, lies in its integration of normative debates about contemporary China with the most compelling evidence and insights from empirical studies of Chinese politics—an integration that China Model theorists have initiated but have yet to fully realize.

A Barebones Theory

Thus construed, my defense of constitutional democracy should also be seen as a "barebones" defense. I borrow this term from Judith Shklar, an exemplary realist political theorist, who wrote in her early work *Legalism* that her liberalism is "barebones" because, "having abandoned the theory of progress and every specific scheme of economics, [it] is committed only to the belief that tolerance is a primary virtue and that a diversity of opinions and habits is not only to be endured but to be cherished and encouraged."[46] This barebones liberalism later evolved into her influential "liberalism of fear," in which liberal constitutionalism is justified by individuals' fear of cruelty.[47] Whether and to what extent this barebones approach helps Shklar justify core liberal principles has itself been the subject of considerable debate, one that I do not engage with here.[48] Still, the term aptly captures the character of my own project, particularly in signaling the debates I set aside, thereby offering readers a clearer sense of what to expect before turning to the substance of my argument.

First, a barebones defense of constitutional democracy implies an effort to strip away the symbolic auras often attached to this regime. Since the Enlightenment, constitutional democracy has frequently been portrayed as the culmination of civilizational progress, while the failure to establish such a system has been interpreted as evidence of a people's inherent lack of "political abilities." This narrative was readily accepted by political thinkers in the late Qing period and later inherited by post-Mao Chinese liberals. Since the 1980s, many Chinese liberals have developed a (problematic) tendency to link liberal democracy with "universal values" or "universal civilization."[49] For them, liberal democracy is not only a political ideal but a means for China to elevate its civilizational status and align itself with the North Atlantic world. This mindset also manifests in what Yao Lin astutely calls a Cold War–style "beaconism," the belief that the United States, like the Statue of Liberty, carries the torch of human civilization and progress.[50]

My realist and pragmatic defense of constitutional democracy in China, by contrast, is deliberately untethered from these grand historical narratives. It does not aim to "advance civilization" by persuading China to adopt constitutional democracy, especially given the Eurocentric and imperialist overtones historically embedded in the concept of "civilization."[51] At the same time, it resists the strong cultural relativist claim, sometimes advanced through a distorted application of decolonial or postcolonial theory, that opposing Western cultural imperialism necessarily entails rejecting constitutional democracy.[52] As I will show, there are legitimate internal reasons, grounded in China's own political and moral realities, for embracing constitutional democracy, despite its Western origins.

Second, a barebones theory also means that it does not frame the pursuit of constitutional democracy in China as an emancipatory project. Constitutional democracy is designed to *curb* state domination, not to *eliminate* it. Its aim is to *reduce* the power imbalance between the state and ordinary citizens, not to *abolish* it altogether. It seeks to make state power more accountable to the people, thereby lowering the risk of power abuse. It cannot guarantee that public officials will never harm citizens, but it provides more avenues for people to seek justice—and, when wronged, to fight back, even if not always with full success. It does not promise that individuals will become complete masters of their own fate, but it does offer the possibility of greater control, especially through the right to vote. It cannot prevent bad policies from being enacted, but it provides mechanisms to correct or mitigate their worst effects. Above all, it acknowledges that coercive authority is an inescapable feature of large and complex societies—unpleasant but necessary—while insisting that it can be constrained, moderated, and made to serve the common good.

Third, because the primary aim of this book is to answer the question "why establish a democracy in China"—rather than "how to maintain or perfect a mature democracy" or "how to design a modern political system based on Confucian tenets"—it does not engage deeply with many of the political and theoretical debates that preoccupy Western political philosophers in the analytic tradition. (As I noted earlier, contemporary Confucian political theory is often more closely aligned with these Western debates than with China's actual political context.) Such debates include, for instance, whether liberal rights should take precedence over democratic procedures, whether judicial review undermines democratic principles, whether parliamentarianism is superior to presidentialism, how to combine electoral, deliberative, and meritocratic institutions to improve governance, and whether the state should pursue mildly perfectionist policies or maintain strict neutrality.

As a barebones theory of constitutional democracy, my account defends foundational principles that have been theorized by Western political theorists for centuries, such as the rule of law, constitutionalism, separation of powers, and competitive elections. However, it deliberately refrains from specifying the institutional details that a democratic China should adopt. This choice is not due to a lack of interest in such details, but because laying them out too concretely at this stage risks being anachronistic and, therefore, unrealistic. Again, the core political question facing China today is whether to move toward constitutional democracy or to persist with a reformed version of one-party rule (aka the China Model). The question of which version of democratic theory is best for China is downstream.

It may be easier for readers with a strong interest in China, whether concerned citizens or attentive observers, to appreciate this barebones approach.

Others, particularly those more invested in contemporary debates in democratic theory or focused on pressing political crises in the West, may see less novelty or depth in this book. In particular, some may rightly note that, unlike Confucian or New Leftist theories, this book does not offer anything uniquely Chinese for the rest of the world to learn from. Like Cold War liberalism (such as Shklar's), they may further argue, it does not propose attractive moral ideals, innovative institutional designs, progressive visions, or decolonial critiques aimed at redressing structural injustices in Western liberal societies or the global order.[53] While advocating for a constitutional democracy that would replace China's one-party rule is a radical stance in the Chinese context, the book may nonetheless appear to reinforce the status quo bias often associated with political realism—the notion that liberal democracy, as "the only game in town," forecloses other viable alternatives.[54] Worse still, in the absence of a robust philosophical defense of political equality, the book may seem overly accommodating to technocratic or bureaucratic structures that many scholars in established democracies view as morally problematic. In this sense, this book may reaffirm what Western readers already know, rather than addressing what they may not know but urgently need to know.

A book cannot cater to everyone; to try would be to blunt its theoretical edge and critical force. I must candidly acknowledge that this book on Chinese political thought is not a typical work of "comparative political theory" (CPT) as it is commonly conceived in Anglophone academia, particularly if CPT is understood as an effort to "decolonize political theory."[55] Still, one important takeaway I hope readers will draw from this book is that each society confronts its own political challenges and pathologies, and that the search for solutions to China's problems should not be subordinated to, or marginalized by, the West's search for solutions to its own.[56] The fact that liberal democracies today face serious internal crises does not in itself justify the conclusion that constitutional democracy lacks value for nondemocratic societies. To respond to the Chinese woman I met on the train by saying, "You don't understand how bad democracy is in countries that adopt it," is an outright denial of her epistemic capacity to grasp her own political reality. While imposing liberal democracy on other nations is a clear form of imperialism, actively dismissing other societies' democratic aspirations can be just as imperialistic.

In the age of the second Trump administration, when liberal democracy in the United States appears increasingly vulnerable to authoritarian takeover, another reason to engage with this book, especially its barebones defense of constitutional democracy, is to gain a clearer understanding of authoritarian power dynamics and to recognize the "bare minimums" that help restrain the overreach of state power and aspiring autocrats. I hope this work encourages Western, particularly American, readers to reflect on the foundations of

"democratic resilience," the institutions that, while imperfect, remain essential for citizens committed to defending and renewing democratic systems.[57] Affirming these bare minimums does not mean embracing complacency or suggesting they are sufficient. There is always room for improvement, but it would be a mistake to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Rethinking Feasibility

The realist approach I adopt treats political theory as a diagnostic practice rooted in a particular historical context. It identifies the problems a political community faces, investigates their underlying causes, and offers prescriptions that serve as plausible solutions. In the Chinese context, the prescription I propose—constitutional democracy—may appear radical and unlikely to materialize in the foreseeable future. As Fewsmith and others have shown, the preconditions typically associated with democratization are still immature, even in a marketized China. In fact, one bitter political reality in China that this book underscores is that the political actor with full agency (the CCP) has no interest in making changes, while the actors that may have some interest in change (those subject to the CCP's rule) are deprived of agency.[58] Political changes are desperately needed yet simultaneously appear utterly out of reach.

In this sense, my theory appears to affirm the desirability of constitutional democracy while acknowledging its lack of feasibility. This raises a serious challenge: Can a realist political theory merely focus on what is desirable while seemingly dismissing what is feasible? Intuitively, we tend to think feasibility strongly shapes our judgment of desirability. A feasible ideal not only appears more attractive, but also inspires hope by offering a realistic path toward a better future. In contrast, a desirable yet distant ideal may provoke disillusionment or cynicism, like a void check that cannot be cashed.

An important question must be answered before ending this chapter: If, as I argued earlier, realism should be liberated from the tyranny of feasibility, what does a less tyrannical, yet still meaningful form of feasibility consideration look like?

Feasibility, I argue, is best understood as a multidimensional concept. Pablo Gilabert and Holly Lawford-Smith offer a helpful framework by conceptualizing feasibility constraints along a spectrum, ranging from hard to soft. Hard constraints refer to fixed conditions that cannot be altered by any human effort, including logic, laws of nature, and perhaps human nature itself. Such constraints render certain political proposals categorically impossible. In contrast, soft constraints are rooted in human affairs, such as economic, institutional, cultural, psychological, and motivational factors. These constraints do not make change impossible but instead raise or lower the probability of a proposal's realization.

Crucially, history demonstrates that such conditions are malleable: they can be reshaped through human effort or altered by contingent developments.[59] An ideal that appears infeasible in the present may become viable in the future. Since the future is an open-ended process, the short-term infeasibility of an ideal may diminish its immediate appeal without undermining its long-term desirability. This is the dynamic view of political feasibility that I endorse.

Moreover, feasibility is often understood narrowly as a matter of whether a political ideal can be implemented in practice—what we might call practical feasibility. However, feasibility considerations are also relevant at an earlier stage: the formulation of the political ideal itself. This second kind of feasibility, which I call theoretical feasibility, concerns whether the ideal polity in question would be capable of functioning in a stable and coherent manner, based on the best available knowledge from the science and historical experience of politics.[60] A political vision might appear normatively attractive on the surface but prove internally incoherent or structurally unsustainable. For example, it might involve conflicting constitutional principles, a power imbalance that entrenches the ruling elites, or a design that fails to incentivize political actors to behave in institutionally appropriate ways. In such cases, we can say that the ideal lacks feasibility even before it is put to the test of implementation.

Taken together, these views of feasibility clarify that my defense of constitutional democracy does not reject feasibility considerations. While I acknowledge that contemporary Chinese society may lack the mature economic, institutional, cultural, psychological, and motivational conditions necessary to realize constitutional democracy in the near term, I resist treating these limitations as hard constraints. They are not immutable. China's own history, marked by profound structural transformations in both the late imperial and modern periods, demonstrates that significant change is possible, especially in the context of ongoing modernization. The fact that we may struggle to envision concrete pathways forward does not negate the reality that the future remains open and full of possibilities. This dynamic understanding of feasibility situates the realization of constitutional democracy in an unforeseeable future.[61] It takes feasibility seriously but refuses to allow it to dictate or foreclose the imaginative and normative work of political theory in China.

As for the ideal of constitutional democracy itself, even if it is not currently realizable, its theoretical feasibility should not be discounted. Its principal rival, the China Model, may appear attractive in theory, as it promises to synthesize the best elements of China's one-party meritocracy with selected democratic mechanisms drawn from the West. However, because the system is dominated by a self-appointed ruling party, it fails to provide sufficient incentives for leaders to respect those democratic mechanisms. Instead, it relies on the moral self-restraint of the party, which human history has shown to be

dangerously unreliable.[62] As a result, the China Model is unlikely to remain stable in the long term. It may either regress into a more repressive authoritarianism or evolve toward a more open, democratic order. By contrast, constitutional democracy institutionalizes political competition and creates meaningful incentives for powerholders to heed public demands. It allows for the development of multiple centers of power that can resist the state's monopolizing ambitions. For these reasons, constitutional democracy is more likely to function effectively as a system for limiting state domination. It is, therefore, a theoretically feasible ideal, even if its practical feasibility in China remains distant.

Would promoting an attractive ideal while postponing its realization to an unforeseeable future generate frustration and cynicism? It might. Yet it is equally important to recognize that promoting an ideal with the expectation of its imminent realization can carry an even greater risk of disillusionment. When a theorist presents an ideal as both desirable and immediately achievable, they may inadvertently frame it as trendy or fashionable. If that ideal fails to materialize, the resulting disappointment and despair can be sudden and paralyzing, for both the theorist and their audience. As the saying goes: the higher the expectation, the greater the fall.[63]

The orientation I aim to cultivate in this book is what Mara van der Lugt aptly describes as "hopeful pessimism."[64] The hopeful pessimist does not believe in the near-term realizability of certain ideals, but continues to hope, not out of naive optimism, but because the future remains open, and because the ideals themselves are worth holding onto. Hope in this sense stems not from the illusion of inevitability, but from a clear-eyed commitment to ideals that are intrinsically meaningful. This attitude, I argue, provides a more durable source of motivation for those committed to political ideals like constitutional democracy.

This mindset is not foreign to the Chinese tradition. Confucius himself, famously described by a contemporary as "the one who knows that what he does is impossible and yet persists anyway" (*Analects* 14.38), perfectly exemplifies hopeful pessimism.[65] Unlike the proto-Daoists, who chose to retreat from public life in times of chaos, Confucius and his disciples continued to advocate for moral and political ideals even when they knew those ideals could not be realized in their own time. When confronted by a hermit who implicitly advised the Confucians to withdraw from government and abandon their efforts to restore order, Zilu, a disciple of Confucius, replied: "The gentleman takes office in order to do what is right, even though he already knows that the Way will not be realized" (*Analects* 18.7). It was precisely their awareness of the world's disarray and the unlikelihood of success that deepened, rather than diminishing, their commitment to the Way.

In sum, these methodological reflections define the distinctive approach of this book. Realist political theory takes feasibility constraints seriously but refuses to treat them as fixed limits that suppress political imagination. It is attuned to the Chinese context yet does not presume that Confucianism must serve as the theoretical point of departure. Instead, realism engages with political realities in a diagnostic mode, using empirical analysis to identify systemic pathologies and to formulate plausible remedies. The normative ideal that emerges from this method—constitutional democracy—is a barebones ideal: it specifies core institutional principles without prescribing detailed institutional blueprints. The overall aim of this book, then, is not only to defend constitutional democracy as a normatively superior alternative to the China Model, but to do so using the very realist framework that proponents of the China Model themselves claim to endorse.

Chapter Outline

This book begins by clarifying the concept of the "China Model." Chapter 2 categorizes China Model discourses into two types—as a model of transition and as a comprehensive normative ideal. While the former focuses on pragmatic reform paths without challenging the ideal of liberal democracy, the latter claims normative superiority over it, advocating a reformed one-party system with certain democratic channels but no competitive elections. I focus on this second type and discuss various Confucian or leftist versions of it. I also discuss "Chinese-style democracy," a borderline case that envisions competitive elections within a one-party political framework.

Chapter 3 offers a critique of the central realist premise shared by China Model theorists: namely, that the CCP has both the rational interest and the institutional capacity to introduce limited democratization from the top down and to eventually reach a stable equilibrium between party leadership and popular involvement. I argue that the structural logic of Leninist rule fundamentally constrains the CCP's willingness to pursue such reforms. A rational CCP, focused on regime survival, is more likely to intensify mechanisms of social control than to democratize. This undermines the core assumption that the CCP is reformable, and exposes the wishful thinking embedded in the claim that the China Model represents the most feasible option for China's future.

This reassessment of the CCP's capacity for self-reform, I contend, should expand the scope of political imagination, prompting people to consider political arrangements beyond Leninist one-party rule. Chapter 4 thus begins to present my affirmative case for constitutional democracy. Drawing on a diagnostic approach, I focus on the problem of state domination, defined as the state's exercise of power without consistent regard for the interests of those

subject to it. Grounded in an empirical analysis of how political power operates in China, I explore the moral problems associated with state domination, particularly the pervasive sense of uncertainty experienced by ordinary citizens. This domination also constrains people's efforts to resist other forms of domination, especially those associated with capitalism.

In chapter 5, I lay out the institutional foundations required to curb state domination. These include mechanisms of horizontal and downward accountability, made possible through freedoms of speech and association, the rule of law, constitutionalism, separation of powers, and competitive elections. In contrast, China Model theorists reject electoral accountability and instead rely on the presumed virtue of political elites to prevent corruption, abuse of power, and oppression. However, without electoral competition, the limited democratic mechanisms endorsed by China Model theorists can be easily neutralized by the ruling party. As such, the China Model fails to provide a viable framework for effectively constraining state power.

Finally, chapter 6 addresses a central claim made by defenders of the China Model: that meritocracy, as embodied by China's current one-party regime, ensures superior governance compared to democracy. I challenge this view by showing that, despite its imperfections, constitutional democracy offers more robust mechanisms for improving governance in post-developmentalist China. It is better positioned to promote bureaucratic professionalization, protect scientific integrity in policymaking, and foster institutional innovation and experimentation. In this sense, constitutional democracy holds significant potential for reconciling two key goals: limiting state domination and enhancing the quality of governance.

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