

Must Great Power Politics Necessarily Be Tragic? *Li* (力) and *De* (德) as Two Paradigms of Power

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Abstract

This text contrasts two perspectives of power. The first is represented by John Mearsheimer's "realism", under which, power is only real when it is coercive, military might and which is comparable to the concept of *li* (力) in traditional Chinese political theory. This paper presents an alternative conception of power—*de* (德)—a non-coercive power achieved through co-empowerment. It is only under the first conception of power that forces us to the conclusion that great power competition must necessarily be tragic. This paper elucidates the governing logics of both accounts of power and shows how they have animated political life in both the European-Western and Sinitic contexts. Central to the *de* conception of power is the concept of *min* (民)—the subject of the *de* conception of political power. We can see an early Chinese transition from "Heaven" as the source of political power to that of the *min*. This paper closes with observations on the parallels between the *de* account of power with agriculturalism and an organicist mentality that is defining of Chinese civilization. In contrast, it draws parallels between the *li* account of power and the overwhelmingly "nomadic" forms of life that characterize European civilization.

Keywords: China, international relations, politics, realism, great power competition

Ali mora biti politika velikih sil nujno tragična? *Li* (力) in *de* (德) kot dve paradigmi moči

Izvleček

Besedilo primerja dve perspektivi moči. Prvo predstavlja »realizem« Johna Mearsheimerja, po katerem je moč resnična le, kadar gre za (prisilno) vojaško silo, ki jo je mogoče primerjati s pojmom *li* (力) v tradicionalni kitajski politični teoriji. V nasprotju s to pa članek predstavi alternativno pojmovanje moči – *de* (德) – neprisilno moč, doseženo s soopolnomočenjem. Le prva koncepcija moči nas sili v sklep, da mora biti tekmovanje velikih sil nujno tragično. Članek pojasnjuje vodilni logiki obeh pojmovanj moči in pokaže, kako sta navdihovali politično življenje tako v evropsko-zahodnem kot v sinitsem

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kontekstu. Osrednje mesto v koncepciji moči *de* ima pojem *min* (民) – subjekt koncepcije politične moči *de*. Opazimo lahko zgodnji kitajski prehod od »Neba« kot izvora politične moči k pojmu *min*. Članek se zaključi z ugotovitvami o vzporednicah med razlagami moči *de* in poljedelstvom ter organicistično miselnostjo, ki določa kitajsko civilizacijo. Po drugi strani pa oriše vzporednice med razlago moči *li* in pretežno »nomadskimi« oblikami življenja, ki zaznamujejo evropsko civilizacijo.

Ključne besede: Kitajska, mednarodni odnosi, politika, realizem, tekmovanje velikih sil

In a recent, widely watched debate (see YouTube n.d.)¹ between John Mearsheimer and Jeffrey Sachs, the two men disagreed on the role that China would play in the emerging multipolar world. Mearsheimer's "realism" forced him into a self-proclaimed "tragic" position—reflecting the thesis of his famous book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001). For Mearsheimer all states want to become the sole "hegemon", and it is part of this realist law that the existing hegemon would do all in its power to ensure it quashes its peer competitors for hegemony. After all, by definition there is only one hegemon. Mearsheimer is aware that in the nuclear age such competition for hegemony can end in our collective annihilation. The tragedy of great power politics is that it might result in the end of humankind. However, for Mearsheimer, there is no other option. His "realist" assumptions force him to conclude that there is only a zero-sum game. Sachs, on the other hand, argues that we must abandon such a mindset that is leading us to collective annihilation. Implicit in Mearsheimer's analysis is a certain assumption and projection: that a powerful China will act in the same way as the powerful colonial empires of the last few hundred years, notably, the USA, the most powerful empire in history.

This paper argues that Mearsheimer is led to such a conclusion due to his assumptions about the nature of power. Classical Chinese political philosophy makes a distinction between two types of power, *li* (力) and *de* (德). Whereas the former is the coercive, military power of the hegemon (*ba* 霸), the latter is the noncoercive power of the true king. In this tradition, it is only the power of the latter that is sustainable. Mearsheimer's realist paradigm cannot account for why classical Chinese political philosophy understood noncoercive power as the one of greater potency, nor can it account for why Sinitic states in history overwhelmingly behaved according to the *de* paradigm. As he puts it, "great powers seek to increase their share of world power. Moreover, these cases also show that great powers are often willing to use force to achieve that goal. Satiated great powers are rare in international politics" (Mearsheimer 2001, 209).

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvFtyDy_Bt0.

In *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (2010), David Kang observed that compared with Europe, which was constantly at war, the Sino-sphere was markedly more peaceful. As Kang notes, from the founding of the Ming dynasty to the Opium Wars—that is, from 1368 to 1841—there were only two wars between China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. These were China’s invasion of Vietnam (1407–1428) and Japan’s invasion of Korea (1592–1598). Apart from these two episodes, “these four major territorial and centralized states developed and maintained peaceful and long-lasting relations with one another” (Kang 2010, 2). Furthermore, although China was clearly the dominant military, cultural, and economic power among these players, Kang writes, “its goals did not include expansion against its established neighboring states” (ibid.). Despite “having the military and technological capability to wage war on a massive scale”, China, Korea, Japan, and other countries in the tribute system coexisted peacefully for extended periods of time (ibid., 1). As Kang notes, military conflict in the Sinosphere came from the steppe nomads and rarely from Sinicized states such as Japan, Korea and Vietnam (Kang 2020, 81). The longstanding peace among Sinicized states is a direct challenge to realist approaches that emphasize the causal role of relative capabilities. These approaches would predict that the far more powerful state, China, would attack the weaker state, Japan, rather than *vice versa*, which is what happened. The historian Kirk Larsen observes, for example, that there were “critical moments in which the Chinese dynasty possessed both the capability and the momentum necessary to complete aggressive expansionistic designs [against Chosŏn] but decided not to do so” (Larsen 2012, 9). Further, realists would further predict that the two weaker states, Korea and Japan, would ally together against China. However, in reality, it was Korea that sought China’s help to counter the Japanese threat, not the other way around (Kang 2020, 82).

Kang further observes that in the history of China’s international relations, China’s relations with the Sinicized states on its eastern and southern borders were characterized by peace and stability. However, China’s relations with the nomadic peoples on its northern and western frontiers were characterized by war and instability. The explanation of Chinese military and economic predominance, Kang remarks, cannot account for both of these simultaneous but divergent realities (Kang 2010, 10). In a more recent work, Kang and his coauthor argue that the reason for this divergent relationship between the Sinitic and non-Sinitic states was the presence of a “common conjecture” and “shared understandings” between the Sinitic states and its absence between the Sinitic and non-Sinitic states (Ma and Kang 2024, 62). The absence of this common conjecture meant that the fighting that historically occurred in East Asia was mostly between different types of political units, not similar ones (Huang and Kang 2022, 4).

Elsewhere, and summarizing the works of Feng Zhang (Zhang 2015) and Ji-Young Lee (Lee 2016), Kang writes that the reason for the “remarkable stability”

between historic China and Korea was the shared “Confucian ‘vocabulary’ that China and Korea brought to their relations” (Kang 2020, 74). Feng Zhang articulates this point through contrasting two types of hierarchy—expressive and instrumental. Expressive hierarchy functions in “accordance with Confucian propriety by establishing ethically endowed relationships for the sake of having such relationships”. Instrumental hierarchy, on the other hand, operates through “consequentialist means-end calculation” (Zhang 2015, 7). Kang notes that,

The world views and political structures of the peoples of the steppes differed significantly from those of the Sinicized states; the former rejected Chinese ideas of civilization and Confucianism, such as written texts or settled agriculture. What centralized political authority that did exist among the various Central Asian peoples was often the result of the ruler’s personal charisma and strength, and as Peter Perdue summarizes, ‘tribal rivalries and fragmentation were common’. (Kang 2020, 76)

Feng Zhang concludes that the stability of Sino-Korean relations was due more to ideas about legitimacy than cost-benefit calculations (Zhang 2015, 77–78). Kang elaborates on this idea when he writes that “it was not differences in capabilities but rather cultural differences that drove much of the conflict in historical East Asia”. “Confucian world views” and a unified China as a centre of gravity that maintained such a world view was the decisive factor in explaining the lack of conflict. This meant that

political units within the core shared a sense of legitimacy, and the institutions of the tributary order helped stabilize their relations. It is not surprising that units that rejected Confucianism and Sinic notions of cultural achievement engaged in conflict with those that embraced Sinic culture. (Kang 2020, 81)

Below, I will argue that we can understand this common conjecture through an account of the *de* understanding of power. We can best understand the characteristics of the *de* understanding of power and why the Sinitic states overwhelmingly operated under this paradigm and the dominant Western² tradition did not through an account of the “agriculturalist” and “nomadic” worldviews. The Sinitic traditions, informed by the socio-economic basis of their societies—agriculturalism—had a particular worldview, one manifestation of which was the *de* understanding

2 I do not mean to be overly essentializing about the “West”. However, it bears stressing that it was the “West” that invented the concept of the “West” in relation to the “rest” or “Orient”. It was the “West” that chose to divide itself from the “rest”. I did not invent the concept of the West”. For a definition of my usage of the “West” that captures our current sensibilities about this term please see Xiang (2023, 205).

of power. The *li* understanding of power, as I will show, is consonant with a nomadic, non-agriculturalist socio-economic lifestyle. This accounts for why both China's northern neighbours and historical European³ states overwhelmingly understood power in terms of *li* or military power. First, I will analyse the logic of the *li* understanding of power via Mearsheimer.

Before we begin, a note about the continuity between historic and contemporary China is needed. One effective way of understanding “Chinese culture” is to see it as the art of governing a civilization of continental scale, that is, a successful formula for efficiently organizing a vast population.⁴ It is under such a view of Chinese culture that we can understand why many nomadic powers that historically conquered China were, to a great extent, compelled to assimilate into “Chinese” culture. To rule over “China”, you are forced to adopt a tried and tested system, and there are only so many variables that can be changed. Likewise, contemporary China cannot reinvent the wheel. Part of the “culture” of the traditional Sinitic state, and part of that recipe for success, is the understanding of *de* as power. The suggestion that contemporary China is a radical break with its past, which is orthodoxy in China Studies, belies a certain colonial hubris best articulated by the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel.

In *The Invention of the Americas* (1995), Dussel gives an account of the developmentalist myth of modernity. (1) Europe is more developed, and its civilization is superior to all others. This means that, (2) through taking on European culture and renouncing its native culture (i.e. the reasons for its barbarity and under-development), the colonized is joining the ranks of civilization/development. This is an emancipation. (3) As a first corollary, Europe's domination over other cultures is justified as a necessary pedagogic violence (“just war”),

3 There is no universally agreed upon definition of “Europe”. Mearsheimer's uses “Europe” to refer to the 19th and 20th century great power competition among the UK, Austria-Hungary, France, Germany and Russia. I am not sure everyone will agree that this is what constitutes “Europe”, which is difficult to define. As Cedric Robinson put it in *Black Marxism*, “Europe” is not a geographical entity—as it is “a peninsular projection from a continent [Asia]” (Robinson 2001, 33). Europe only came to have a self-identity in the end of the Dark Ages (6th–11th centuries) and this self-identity was constituted in relation to the non-European world. As Robinson continues, “Europe emerged from the negation of the real. In order to fabricate Europe, institutional, cultural and ideological materials were consciously smuggled into this hinterland from afar by kings and popes, episcopals, clerics, and monastic scholars. No reality, then, substantiates the imagined, autonomous European continent” (ibid.). A similar point—that Europe exists in a negative dialectical relationship with the “rest” is echoed by Giorgio Agamben: “History shows unequivocally that Europe in the political sense serves as a device or stratagem, deployed in response to whatever crisis looms at the moment: Islam, the New World, the East. The term ‘Europe’ does not denote a substantial political reality, then, but a tactical-strategic device aimed at a specific, predominantly military objective. It is therefore a purely negative concept, whose content is defined from time to time in opposition to a real or fabricated enemy.” (Agamben 2025, 25–26)

4 Such is the opinion of Herrlee Creel (Creel 1970, 1–2).

a necessary “growing pains” towards the end of civilization and development. The suffering and anguish of the dominated culture is an unavoidable part of the medical therapy. (4) As a second corollary, the European conquistador is understood not only as innocent but virtuous for inflicting this necessary, pedagogic violence. Like a good doctor, the pain he inflicts is for the ends of medical treatment. (5) As a third corollary, the victims swallowing the West’s bitter pills are culpable for their own violent conquest and their own victimization. After all, it was only due to their own barbarity and their inability to autonomously overcome this barbarity that necessitated the conquistador-cum-doctor’s violent colonization or course of therapy. When the underdeveloped peoples irrationally rebel against their own salvific emancipation-through-conquest, they double their culpability. In sum, in the victimizing act, the conqueror is innocent and the victim culpable (Dussel 1995, 66). As Dussel concludes elsewhere, modernity emerges through the act of Europe affirming “itself as the ‘center’ of a *World History* that it inaugurates; the ‘periphery’ that surrounds this centre is consequently part of its self-definition” (Dussel 1993, 65). Such a view, however, is a myth,⁵ European colonization did not end historical time and bring us into the end of history, and thus “modernity”, in the way that is often presented. Nor was the past few hundred years of European domination able to undo the accumulated weight of human history that preceded it.

The China of today is not a radical break with the millennia of history that shaped it. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Chinese Communist Party’s (CPC) foreign policy principles⁶ are best understood according to the paradigm of *de* that will be explored in this paper. *De* as power seeks to gain power through mutual co-empowerment or “win-win”, one of the CPC’s favourite slogans. Today, 34 out of 54 African countries list China as their top import partner (Umemoto 2025), and China is Africa’s biggest trading partner (Eghosa 2025). China is also ASEAN’s largest trading partner (ASEAN n.d.), which is ironic since ASEAN was set up as an anti-communist alliance (Dang 2025, 2). Moreover, China currently ranks as South America’s top trading partner and the second largest for Latin America as a whole, after the United States (Roy 2025). This is no small achievement, given that the US—under the Monroe Doctrine—regards Latin America as its own backyard, and has overthrown numerous democratically elected leaders while installing far-right dictators to maintain that order. China’s influence in these regions was achieved not through *li* but through *de*. This

5 Please see introduction to forthcoming volume *How China Shaped the Enlightenment: A Transcultural History of Modern Thought* for a more detailed discussion of this issue (Powers and Xiang, forthcoming).

6 For example, its “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”: mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and co-operation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.

behaviour closely mirrors the Ming dynasty's practice of sending Zheng He and his treasure fleets across the known world. Then as now, the point was to establish mutually beneficial relations that will ultimately increase the power and prestige of the Chinese state.

China is today the largest economy in the world as measured in purchasing power parity terms. In 2024, and according to the IMF, China's share of global GDP was 19.05%. By 2023, China was the largest bilateral trading partner for 60 economies, almost twice as many as the US (Rajah and Albayrak 2025). Chinese state media claims that in 2024 it was the primary trading partner for more than 150 countries and regions. Today, China is the dominant trade partner for most of Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Oceania, South America, and Africa (Soltani 2025). In 2013, China became the largest trading nation in the world based on the value of its imports and exports (Jahn 2024). China thus industrialized and became a modern industrial economy without treading the same paths that colonial powers like the UK and latterly the US followed. This colonial path essentially meant, in its first stage, deindustrializing their colonies such that they became captive markets for British/American goods (Kohli 2020). In its second stage, the hegemon sought to become a rentier economy in which its colonies were kept in a perpetual stage of feudal bondage through various institutions, such as the IMF (Hudson 1972). As the international relations scholar Linda Matar writes, unlike traditional imperialist powers, contemporary China "transfers wealth (value) to developing nations", and it is because of this that China is

predisposed to remain in its position as the leading anti-imperialist power globally. Building roads, ports, and other infrastructure in the developing world is in part the new form of a people's war. (Matar 2025, 2; Cf. Kadri 2021)

This kind of behaviour—in which one invests as opposed to extracts from the "periphery"—as I noted in *Chinese Cosmopolitanism*, is distinctive of dynastic China (Xiang 2023, 39; Cf. Wong 1997, 148; Arrighi 2007, 318). Thus, "the developing world [...] is set to gain from China's alternative mode of integration that is based on demand-led growth and cooperative globalization" (Matar 2025, 7).

It is because Chinese behaviour represents a real alternative to the colonial world order of extractive capitalism in which a tiny *Herrenvolk*, racialized elite profit at the expense of the rest that Matar writes, "China's integration with Third World countries, based on common prosperity, can boost international development". Chinese integration into the world will be a net positive to the world. In this light, Matar states: "The rise of China will also lead to a decline in the image of US

empire and its neoliberal ideology, reshaping the way people conceive of their social circumstances” (Matar 2025, 7; 2024). Likewise, Adham Sayed contrasts the “US-dominated imperialist system” against “a multilateral order where China plays a significant role”. Sayed goes as far as to write that the future of the Middle East “may hinge on the success of China’s alternative to imperialism, which could reduce US intervention and open space for progressive development” (Sayed 2025, 1). To grasp this Chinese alternative, we must first examine the conception of power to which it stands opposed. We can do this through visiting a representative example: Mearsheimer’s “realist” understanding of power.

Li (力) and Mearsheimer’s Understanding of Power

For Mearsheimer the telos of all states is its own survival, and power ensures the state’s survival, hence why states want power. Mearsheimer understands this power and the strategy for survival in a particular way. For him, the only way for a state to ensure its own survival, that is, to have absolute security, is to be the only great power in a system—the hegemon. Being the *only* great power in a system means that merely being the strongest of all its peers is not enough. Instead, it means being in a position of absolute superiority, that is, the ability to potentially *control* others. This superiority is understood in military terms—the ability to devastate all peers (Mearsheimer 2001, 2), and thus “hegemony means domination of the system, which is usually interpreted to mean the entire world” (ibid., 40). Survival is only assured if there is a single alpha (or hegemon) who has dominion over myriad lesser states who pose no challenge to the total power of the hegemon itself. As Mearsheimer writes, the “ultimate aim” of any state is “to gain a position of dominant power over others, because having dominant power is the best means to ensure one’s own survival” (ibid., xi). In sum, “hegemony is the best way for any state to guarantee its own survival” (ibid., 4).

Two aspects are worthy of attention in Mearsheimer’s understanding of power. First, that power is necessarily military capacity and thus negative or destructive in nature. Second, power is a finite resource of predetermined quantity. This means that for anyone to have more power means that someone else must necessarily have less of it. I will address both these points in turn.

Mearsheimer’s only metric of power is that of physical, coercive power, that is, military force. He makes a distinction between military power and latent power. Latent power being the socio-economic support that allows for building military power⁷ (ibid., 55). The two most important aspects of this latent power are the size of a state’s population and its wealth (ibid., 61). Abundant wealth and a large

7 “Latent power constitutes the societal resources that a state has available to build military forces” (Mearsheimer 2001, 60).

population are not desirable in themselves, but only as a means towards “building formidable military forces” (ibid., 56). Latent power constitutes the societal resources that a state has available to build military forces (ibid., 60). Latent power is thus merely potential, whereas military power is actual.

I argue that power is based on the particular material capabilities that a state possesses. The balance of power, therefore, is a function of tangible assets—such as armored divisions and nuclear weapons—that each great power controls. (Ibid., 55)

The only manifestation of power is violence, that is, material or physical coercion, and hence “power in international politics is largely a product of the military forces that a state possesses” (ibid., 83). For Mearsheimer, therefore, “a state’s effective power is ultimately a function of its military forces and how they compare with the military forces of rival states” (ibid., 55).

That Mearsheimer’s logic of power is destructive in nature is well exemplified by his own analogy for the writing of his book:

Writing a book is usually a protracted and painful process. I liken it to having to get up day after day to wrestle with a bear for hours on end. To finally whip the bear, it helps immensely to have strong support at home as well as in the arena of intellectual combat. (Ibid., xvi)

It is paradoxical that Mearsheimer describes something creative—the writing of a book—in terms of a destructive analogy, whipping a bear. Whipping a bear does not produce any new value, whereas the intellectual labour of writing a book does: creation does not come out of destruction and “combat” is not what is productive of value.

Related to Mearsheimer’s view that power is measured in terms of physical coercion or destructiveness is his characterization of power as if it were a finite resource. For Mearsheimer, “the overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states” (ibid., 2). Furthermore, “not only does a great power seek to gain power at the expense of other states, it also tries to thwart rivals bent on gaining power at its expense” (ibid., 3). Power is understood here as a material feature of objects instead of emergent from and contingent upon the way that the human engages with her reality. If a resource is finite, then someone having a certain quantity of it will be at the expense of another who cannot have it. This logic is well exemplified in an example that Mearsheimer used. When it appeared to the first chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck, in the early 1860s that Poland, which was not an independent state at the time, might regain its sovereignty, he made the following

remark: “Restoring the Kingdom of Poland in any shape or form is tantamount to creating an ally for any enemy that chooses to attack us”. And therefore he advocated that Prussia should “smash those Poles till, losing all hope, they lie down and die; I have every sympathy for their situation, but if we wish to survive we have no choice but to wipe them out” (quoted in Mearsheimer 2001, 3).

Elsewhere (Xiang 2022; 2024, 198), I noted the characteristic tendency in American statecraft (and by extension European great power statecraft) to view positives as arising out of destruction. I elucidated this paradoxical logic of this worldview via Jean Paul Sartre and Lewis R. Gordon’s account of “bad faith”. Through the concept of “bad faith”, we can understand the two related characteristics in Mearsheimer’s understanding of power that I outlined above, that is, the tendency to view power in merely militaristic terms and that power is a pre-existing finite good. In “bad faith”, an agent sees the value of the world as pre-given, and so evades the existential fact of our freedom: that our actions creatively produce value. It is this bad faith understanding of values and power that accounts for why Bismarck, Mearsheimer as well as American and the foreign policy of Western colonial powers in general overwhelmingly employ and promote a strategy of dividing and de-developing competitors. If power is a pre-existing or extant property of the world, then it can neither be created nor destroyed.

We can draw an analogy between this understanding of power and the principle of the conservation of energy in physics. According to this, the energy of interacting bodies or particles in a closed system remains constant. Energy is neither created nor destroyed but merely changes forms, going from potential to kinetic to thermal energy. The analogy of the conservation of energy when it becomes a feature of human psychology can be likened to bad faith. By analogy, in the “bad faith” understanding of power as a finite good, if I disabuse someone of their power, then that power does not go away but is transferred into another form—to me. Under this way of thinking, physically coercing someone to give up their power results in the power accruing to myself. Further, this understanding of power is fundamentally non-creative, it is out of the question that I can create more power through cooperation with others.

Previously (Xiang 2022, 59), I quoted Andrew Bacevich who, in the last chapter of *Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent War*, “Cultivating Our Own Garden”, wrote of how despite “promising prosperity and peace, the American empire is “propelling the United States toward insolvency and perpetual war”. For Bacevich, instead of the logic of militarism, the US should cultivate its own garden, that is, use its socio-economic power (what Mearsheimer calls “latent power”) not for projecting military power abroad but in investing in its own society. For Bacevich, evidently investing this latent power in one’s own society is the best way to safeguard the state’s security concerns. However, Bacevich’s view would be nonsensical under the paradigm of power outlined above (what

Mearsheimer calls “realist”). Under such a view power is only real or kinetic, as opposed to potential, when it manifests as military power. An economically prosperous and socially flourishing society is a mere means towards the end of military power, and it is nonsensical to be content with the mere means. Latent power does not allow a state to have the power that is necessary for securing its own security—an overwhelming coercive capacity to control and subjugate all other states. Such a mentality then makes sense of why the US military budget, based on 2024 data, is more than the next nine countries combined (Peter G. Peterson Foundation 2025). The maintenance of around eight hundred American military bases (Vine 2015) across the world is costly, but under “realist” calculations it is necessary for subjugating other states such that the security concerns of the hegemon can be ensured.

Mearsheimer’s underlying logic that value comes from militarism can be understood as falling under the bellicist paradigm of state formation. Under this view, war created the (European) state. War and preparation for war motivated the creation of a bureaucratic administration for the purpose of extracting resources from society. The states that could most efficiently extract resources were the most likely to endure, thereby making the successful states more warlike in the process (Huang and Kang 2022, 12). Gorski and Sharma write that the bellicist thesis of state formation takes “neo-Darwinian natural selection on military capacity” as “the fundamental law of state formation” (Gorski and Sharma 2017, 98). The sovereign’s extraction of resources for the purposes of war indirectly caused the institutional constraints on his power. For example, in order to raise taxes for war, the sovereign had to compromise with politically powerful societal actors who demanded dilution of the sovereign’s political power in forms such as representative institutions. The emergence of these institutions, in turn, further accounting for the unintended consequence of economic growth (Huang and Kang 2022, 13).

The most canonical expression of this bellicist paradigm of state formation comes from Charles Tilly, who famously said that “war made the state, and the state made the war”. However, such a mentality is pervasive in the European literature. Another example of this bellicist view, for example, can be found in Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* and *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*. In both these works, Kant writes of how it is the human being’s warlike nature (“unsociable sociability”) that drives forth human progress. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere,⁸ “liberalism” (as a socio-political theory) and “capitalism” (as an economic theory) converge in understanding conflict or bellicism as the driving engine of progress.

8 *The Deepening and Coexistence of Humanity: The Confucian Alternative to the Liberal-Capitalist Subject* (manuscript under review).

It is this assumption that power is tantamount to physical coercion or military power that explains why European political philosophy is driven by the animating assumption of the abuse of power. Canonical in the most influential theories of political economy and social science is the assumption of a predatory, maximally extractive ruler, and thus the importance of institutions for defending the public against their abuse of power. All the canonical approaches to the development of states assume that political leaders are motivated by the desire to maximally expropriate wealth from the population. In their paper, “The Mandate of Heaven or Divine Right of Kings? Political Authority, Values, and Institutions in Historical East Asia”, Kang and Huang observe, however, that the core animating idea across the Sinitic realm (i.e., China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan) was the responsibility of power. Kang and Huang observe that in the Sinitic context, China became advanced much earlier than Europe without developing any of the institutional constraints on ruler predation that are posited in the standard literature as requisites for economic development. These constraints include but are not limited to parliamentary sovereignty, constitutional monarchies, independent central banks, or even a financial system (Kang and Huang, forthcoming). Kang and Huang explain this differing reality by way of culture: prevalent in the Sinitic context is a culture in which the state has a moral purpose and that its *raison d'être* is the provision of public goods. As Kang and Huang explain

[i]n historical East Asia, what sustained the Chinese state over two millennia was the philosophical and cultural purpose of the state, as expressed through Confucian texts and principles, as well as Daoist, Legalist, and Buddhist ideas. (Kang and Huang, forthcoming)

We can better understand the divergent reality in the Sinitic context through the Chinese understanding of power as *de*.

***De* (德) and *Min* (民) as the Basis of the Confucian Understanding of Power**

The *Mencius* articulated a vision of rulership in terms of *de* as opposed to *li* that was to become the canonical vision the Chinese understanding of statecraft.

Mencius said, ‘One who, supported by force [*li* 力], pretends to being humane is a hegemon [*ba* 霸], and a hegemon [*ba* 霸] has to have a large state. One who out of Virtue [*de* 德] practices humaneness [*ren* 仁] is a true king [*wang* 王], and a true king does not need anything large. Tang did it with only seventy *li*, and King Wen did it with a hundred.

孟子曰：“以力假仁者霸，霸必有大国，以德行仁者王，王不待大。汤以七十里，文王以百里。”

Mencius draws a connection between physical force—*li*—and a particular form of rule—hegemony (*ba* 霸). A rule of *de* is characterized by humaneness (*ren* 仁), and this means that the ruler’s sovereignty can be sustained without manifest power (“a true king does not need anything large”). Mencius goes on to explain why this is the case:

When one uses force [*li* 力] to make people submit, they do not submit in their hearts but only because their strength is insufficient. When one uses virtue [*de* 德] to make people submit, they are pleased to the depths of their hearts, and they sincerely submit.’ (Mencius 2009, 33)

以力服人者，非心服也，力不赡也；以德服人者，中心悦而诚服也，如七十子之服孔子也。”

Whereas *li* is physical and coercive power, *de* is nonphysical noncoercive power. In classical Chinese terminology *li* is *wei* (为) whereas *de* is *wuwei* (无为). A hegemon needs a large state because the source of their power is physical—their power is *wei*, and thus based on coercive might. They thus need a large population of labourers to realize this coercive might. In contrast, power as *de* is rooted in human relationships. Below, I will show how this *de* understanding of power is manifested through an ability to empower the population in a state, and thus why *de* power is non-coercive and non-militaristic in nature. First, it is important to see the transition of the ancient Chinese understanding of power as rooted in divine sources, to a secular understanding of power as rooted in human sources, or “human resources”. Under this latter view, we can understand the power of the ruler is derived from his managerial capabilities as the head of such resources.

In his comparative reflections on the genesis of Chinese civilization and the origins of the Chinese state, Kwang-chih Chang famously argued that it was politics rather than technology and trade led to the formation of Chinese civilization (Chang 1983; Liu and Chen 2012, 393). Chang argues that central to the rise of civilization in ancient China was the political leaders’ close relationship with shamanism, often being shamans themselves. According to Chang, early Chinese art—especially ritual bronzes—was fundamentally political. He saw shamanistic objects as tools of power that mediated between worlds. This meant that the possession of these objects endowed their possessor with access to Heaven, wisdom and foreknowledge (Chang 1983; 1989, 157–58). Chang’s description of political power as tantamount to religious or supernatural power extends from the beginnings of complex societies in China (in the late neolithic) in 3000 BCE to late Eastern Zhou 东周

in 650–221 BCE. The ruler-cum-shaman's political authority thus derives from his religious authority, as one who is able to manage the human relationship with the divine. Sacrifices to the gods, for example, are a way of benefitting the divine. However, the central texts of the Zhou show a transition in the ruling elites' understanding of the source of their political authority, not as rooted in *tian* but instead in the *min*. We could thus say that the basis of their political power had shifted from a relationship to divinity to a relationship to the “people” (*min* 民)

One of the representative texts that demonstrate this transition in the basis of the state's power from divine authority (in what could be understood as a Chinese “divine right of kings”) to that of the *min* is the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚书), which problematized the idea that kings have a divine right to rule. Instead, the text suggested that one earns the right to rule through the accumulation of virtuous (*de* 德) acts. The *Shangshu* recounts how when King Wu 武王 of the Zhou attacked King Zhou 纣王 (the last king of the Shang), he did so on the basis that “there is no constancy in the Heavens' commands” (“Announcement to the Prince of Kang”)—or that the “divine right of kings” is not permanent. The Mandate of Heaven belongs to whomever is virtuous, and given that the Shang were unvirtuous, they had lost it. The rulers from the Zhou dynasty concluded from the Shang's loss of the Mandate of Heaven that

the Heavens know nothing of the kind of unconditional love between kin, it only assists those with moral virtue [*de*]. There is no constancy in the hearts of the common people [*min* 民], they only cherish the memory of the benevolent [惠]. (*Shangshu*, “Charge to Zhong of Cai”)

皇天无亲，惟德是辅。民心无常，惟惠之怀

They thus formulated the idea of “having virtue (*de*) in order to be adequate to the Heavens” (以德配天). In this way the *Shangshu* connects *tian* or divine authority with securing the needs of the population itself.

In the chapter “Wu Cheng” (武成 “Successful Completion of the War”) that records King Wu of the Zhou's proclamation after defeating the Shang dynasty, King Wu justifies his actions by the Mandate of Heaven:

Shou, the present king of Shang, is without principle, cruel and destructive to the creatures of Heaven, injurious and tyrannical to the multitudes of the people [*min* 民], lord of all the vagabonds under Heaven, who collect about him as fish in the deep, and beasts in the prairie. I, the little child, having obtained [the help of] virtuous men, presume reverently to comply with [the will of] God [*shangdi* 上帝], and make an end of his disorderly ways.

今商王受无道，暴殄天物，害虐烝民，为天下逋逃主，萃渊薮。
予小子既获仁人，敢祗承上帝，以遏乱略

King Wu proclaims that the Shang have lost the Mandate of Heaven because they are hurting the *min*, whereas he will comply with Heaven's will which is to bring prosperity to them.

We can see the transition from the ruler's authority as rooted in an access to divine sources to an access to the *min* when the text conflates "Heaven" with the "people". For example: "Heaven hears and sees as our people hear and see" (天聪明，自我民聪明) (*Shangshu*, "Counsels of Gao-yao"), "Heaven is compassionate for the people. What the people desire, Heaven will be found to give effect to" (天矜于民，民之所欲，天必从之) (*Shangshu*, "Great Declaration I"), "Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear" (天视自我民视，天听自我民听) (*Shangshu*, "Great Declaration II"). The source of political authority is now ultimately rooted in the *min* by way of the vocabulary of "Heaven".

We can also see this transition of the source of legitimacy of rulership from a divine source to the people in the changing meanings of the term *de*. As Huaiyu Wang has shown, *de* can be understood as "the Heavenly endowment essential for the life of all human and natural beings" (Wang 2015, 82). In the early Chinese mind, sagacious personalities were those who could appropriately preserve and propagate Heavenly and ancestral benedictions, i.e., *de*. As Wang writes, the sense of moral virtue is thus only a derivative meaning of *de* (*ibid.*), Wang argues that the morphology of *de* shows that its original meaning is the enactment of divine blessing and is related to the sacrificial ceremonies of ancestral worship (*ibid.*, 85). Below, I will focus on passages from the *Xici* 系辞 (*Classic of Changes*), a commentary on the *Yijing* 易经 (the ancient manual of divination), to show the intellectual connection now being made between *de* and ability to benefit the *min*.

Power as Divining the Will of the People

In the "Da Gao" (大诰, "Great Announcement") chapter of the *Shangshu*, the Duke of Zhou 周公 cites divination results to legitimize the necessity of military campaigns to suppress rebellions after the death of King Wu. "I dare not conceal the majestic will of Heaven. By using the great precious tortoise-shell left to us by King Wen for divination, we can clearly discern the intent of the Supreme Lord [God/Shangdi]." (予不敢于闭于天降威，用宁王遗我大宝龟，绍天明。). From this passage we can see the importance of divination as the way the ruler communicated with the divine—the ultimate source of political authority.

We can see how divination transitioned from divining the will of *tian* to divining the will of the *min* in the *Xici*. The *Xici* is a series of rationalizations for the divinatory power of the *Yijing*. In the *Xici*, we find passages that argue for the efficacy of the *Yijing* system in its ability to observe the needs of the *min*. In *Xici* (1.11), for example, we read that the *de* of the yarrow stalks resides partly in its ability to share in anxieties (*huan* 患) of the *min*:

They used the *Changes* to cast light on the *Dao* of Heaven and to probe into the conditions of the common folk [*min* 民]. This is the numinous thing that they inaugurated in order to provide beforehand for the needs of the common folk [*min* 民]. The sages did their fasting with the *Changes* and got their precautions from it. [...] Taking advantage of and putting to use the ins and outs involved, one provides all the common folk [*min* 民] with the use of it, and this is called the numinous.

是以明于天之道，而察于民之故，是兴神物以前民用。圣人以此斋戒，以神明其德夫。是故阖户谓之坤，辟户谓之乾，一阖一辟谓之变，往来不穷谓之通，见乃谓之象，形乃谓之器，制而用之谓之法，利用出入，民咸用之谓之神。

In *Xici* (2.2), in an important passage that explains the origins of the institutions of civilization, we read how Baoxi 包牺 and later sages invented the various institutions of sedentary, agricultural and civilized life to benefit the *min*.

He [Baoxi] had midday become market time, had the people [*min* 民] of the world gather, had the goods of the world brought together, had these exchanged, had them then retire to their homes, and enabled each one to get what he should. He probably got the idea for this from the hexagram Shihe 'Bite Together'. After Lord Shen Nong perished, the Lord Yellow Emperor, Lord Yao, and Lord Shun applied themselves to things. They allowed things to undergo the free flow of change and so spared the common folk [*min* 民] from weariness and sloth. With their numinous powers they transformed things and had the common folk [*min* 民] adapt to them. [...] The benefit of pestles and mortars was such that the myriad folk [*min* 民] used them to get relief from want. [...] In remote antiquity, people knotted cords to keep things in order. The sages of later ages had these exchanged for written tallies, and by means of these all the various officials were kept in order, and the myriad folk [*min* 民] were supervised. They probably got the idea for this from the hexagram Kuai 'Resolution'. (*Xici* 2.2)

日中为市，致天下之民，聚天下之货，交易而退，各得其所，盖取诸《噬嗑》。神农氏没，黄帝、尧、舜氏作，通其变，使民不倦，神而化之，使民宜之。杵臼之利，万民以济，盖取诸小过。上古结绳而治，后世圣人易之以书契，百官以治，万民以察，盖取诸夬。

In *Xici* (2.1), in linking divination to the ability of the ruler to provide public goods, the *Xici* defines *min* as the subject of the moral-political order. Whereas *ren* (人) are merely human capital, once the *ren* become the subjects to the moral-political concerns of the ruler, they become *min*. *De* rulership, like the *de* of Heaven and Earth which supports the growth of all things without partiality, supports the flourishing of the *min*:

The great virtue of Heaven and Earth is called ‘generation’. The great treasure of the sage is called his ‘position’. The means by which such a one preserves this position we call ‘benevolence’; the means by which he gathers people [*ren* 人] to him we call ‘resources’. The regulation of resources, the rectification of pronouncements, and his preventing the people [*min* 民] from doing wrong we call ‘righteousness’. (*Xici* 2.1)

天地之大德曰生，圣人之大宝曰位。何以守位？曰仁。何以聚人？曰财。理财正辞、禁民为非曰义。

Xici (2.1) exemplifies Huaiyu Wang’s point that the early Chinese ideal of *dezhi* (德治)—the virtuous rule of benefaction—grows out of an older cosmic sense of *de* as the cyclical rhythm of cosmic forces that ensures the growth of the myriad things. *De* in the sense of political authority follows this paradigm of ensuring cosmic empathy and reciprocity that is the basis of the flourishing of the myriad things. It is this cosmic context of *de* that explains the “distinctive dimension of early Chinese government, whose leadership does not turn on exclusive heavenly sanction but on the cohesive power of communal attachment and collaboration” (Wang 2015, 91). The sagacious ruler of *dezhi* promotes empathy and reciprocity between his community just as Heaven and Earth do between the myriad things. In this way, the ruler of *de* promotes the flourishing of his community, and Heaven and Earth promote the flourishing of the myriad things.

The idea that *dezhi* is constituted by the ability to impartially promote the flourishing of the *min* is expounded upon in the *Liji* (礼记). The “Confucius at Home at Leisure” (Kongzi Xian Ju) chapter of this records a conversation in which Confucius’ disciple Zixia 子夏 remarks that the three sage kings of ancient

China⁹ are traditionally referred to as having *de* that is equal to Heaven and Earth (三王之德，参于天地). Confucius' response to Zixia's question of how the three sage kings earned this reputation, is that it is because they "reverently displayed the Three Impartialities, while they comforted all beneath the sky under the toils which they imposed" (奉三无私以劳天下). Confucius thus explains the quality of *de* rulership in terms of the impartiality (*wusi* 无私) of Heaven and Earth. Heaven shelters all without partiality, the Earth bears all without partiality, and the sun and the moon illuminate all without partiality (天无私覆，地无私载，日月无私照). Likewise The "Different Teaching of the Different Kings" ("Jing Jie") chapter of the *Liji* records a similar statement from Confucius.¹⁰

The Son of Heaven forms a triad with Heaven and Earth. Hence, in power of his goodness he is their correlate, and his benefits extend at once to all things. His brilliancy is equal to that of the sun and moon, and enlightens all within the four seas, not excepting anything, however minute and small.

天子者，与天地参。故德配天地，兼利万物，与日月并明，明照四海而不遗微小。

The content of *de* rulership is the impartial benefaction of all things. The realization of *de* rulership and the benefaction of all rests, in turn, on a "harmony" understanding of power. Under this mode, power is a result of those who can put things into more productive relationships. Those who can produce greater value through insightfully bringing diverse things into productive relationship produce greater value for a greater number of people. In this way, one is promoting the common good, which is the source of political legitimacy and the basis of power as *de*.

That *de* power is the ability to bring benefit to the peoples it brings into a relationship, which explains the traditional source of Chinese political authority in interstate relations. Summarizing the recent work of international relations scholars who study the historic Sinosphere, Kang writes that, "Chinese authority was considered legitimate because China's Confucian-inspired social order was generally valued by its subordinates" (Kang 2020, 72). Since the Confucian-inspired social order was able to benefit those who partook of the system, it was viewed as legitimate.

9 Yu the Great 大禹, the founder of the Xia 夏, King Tang 汤, the founder of the Shang 商 dynasty and King Wen 文, the founder of the Zhou 周 dynasty.

10 I benefited from Wang (2015) for these two references.

Power as *de* is necessarily co-empowerment: power is proportionally correlated with the ability to co-empower others. The *locus classicus* of what constitutes the Kingly Way (*wangdao* 王道) in contrast to the Way of the Hegemon (*badao* 霸道) is found in the *Mencius*. Here, the rule of *de* is tantamount to the provision of public goods, and power and legitimacy accrue to those who can actuate such a “kingly way”.

There is a Way to obtain the world: one gains the world by gaining the people [*min* 民]; when one gains the people [*min* 民], one gains *tianxia*. There is a Way of gaining the people: by gaining their hearts one gains the people [*min* 民]. There is a Way to gain their hearts: it is simply to collect for them what they like, and not to lay on them what they dislike. The people’s [*min* 民] turning to humaneness [*ren* 仁] is like water flowing downward or wild animals heading for the wilds. (Mencius 2009, 78–79, modified, 4A9)

得天下有道：得其民，斯得天下矣；得其民有道：得其心，斯得民矣；得其心有道：所欲与之聚之，所恶勿施尔也。民之归仁也，犹水之就下、兽之走圯也。

The kingly way understands power in terms of *de*, which manifests itself through non-coercive action, that is, through non-domination. Power as *de* overcomes the traditional international relations dualism between “realism” and “idealism” that Mearsheimer operates under. *De* is simultaneously “efficacy” and “virtue”, as well as “charisma”. Traditional international relations theory dualistically takes utilitarian calculations of interest to be mutually exclusive with moral considerations. In the civilizational understanding of power presented above, power is only sustainable if it is *de*. The exemplary image of the *de* or civilizational understanding of power is presented *Analects* (2.1): “The Master said, ‘He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it.’” (为政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而众星共之。) Such a non-coercive, *wuwei* image of power is realized in practice through the kingly way, that is, through the benefaction of others. It is when the ruler is able to benefit or co-empower those around him that the *min* flock to him. Such a compelling power over others cannot be achieved through coercion, it can only be achieved through co-empowerment. In this worldview, the only way for the agent to sustain long-term influence over others is to persuade them to view the agent as a person whose abilities, qualities, and continued existence would ensure their collective flourishing. Power and morality are one and the same thing.

De (德) Statecraft as *Wuwei*

However, there has been a persistent inability to understand the above *de* understanding of power. An inability to understand that moral behaviour becomes political cachet, or that the dichotomy between idealism/moral behaviour and realism in statecraft is a false dualism, is exemplified by Yuri Pines.

Pines argues that the use of *de* in the *Zuo Zhuan* is radically different from its usage in more canonically Confucian texts such as the *Analects*. This is because whereas the *Zuo Zhuan* uses *de* in terms of charismatic power, political potency, proper decorum, mildness and kindness in domestic or interstate affairs, in the *Analects*, *de* is used in the sense of “personal morality” (Pines 2021, 141). Pines’ inability to understand the continuum between what he terms the more “political” usages of *de* in the *Zuo Zhuan* and what he observes to be the merely personal morality usages of *de* in the *Analects* is an eloquent example, albeit in microcosm, of why Mearsheimer only understands power in military terms.

At the heart of Pines’ confusion is an inability to understand that moral and political power are not mutually exclusive and distinct from each other. The treatment of morality and politics as distinct and exclusive is a modern assumption of the western philosophical tradition. Pines seems to operate under a merely deontological understanding of the nature of “morality”. For him, since *de* in the *Zuo Zhuan* overwhelmingly refers to political actions without “any reference to a ruler or a minister’s individual morality” these politically *de* actions are “unrelated to its moral content” (Pines 2021, 136). Pines seems to lack a basic understanding of how the Chinese worldview understands the nature of “morality”. Morality in texts such as the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Analects* does not operate under a deontological paradigm in which it is merely a personal relationship between the individual and their God and or divinely sanctioned deontological rules. Chinese texts such as the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Analects* have instead a very sophisticated understanding of social psychology. That which is moral (*de*) is precisely that which shows political acumen (*de*). Political acumen being understood as actions that co-benefit or co-empower both the agent (to whom *de* is attributed) and the subject of their actions or the subjects to whom the agent is bringing into a relationship with himself. The accounts of *de* in the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Analects* are perfectly congruent with each other if we understand *de* as the provision of public goods. This provision of public goods is what Huang and Kang have identified as the substance of the Sinitic social contract, or the “moral purpose of the state” (Huang and Kang 2022, 42).

Pines’ is unable to understand the *de* account of power for the same reason that Mearsheimer only understands power in militaristic terms. In being unable to understand *de*, both Pines and Mearsheimer cannot understand how power can be legitimate and sustainable. Let me borrow James Baldwin’s diagnosis of the illegitimacy of American power to make this point:

For a very long time, [...] America prospered—or seemed to prosper: this prosperity cost millions of people their lives. Now, not even the people who are the most spectacular recipients of the benefits of this prosperity are able to endure these benefits: they can neither understand them nor do without them, nor can they go beyond them. Above all, they cannot, or dare not, assess or imagine the price paid by their victims, or subjects, for this way of life, and so they cannot afford to know why the victims are revolting. They are forced, then, to the conclusion that the victims—the barbarians—are revolting against all established civilized values—which is both true and not true—and, in order to preserve these values, however stifling and joyless these values have caused their lives to be, the bulk of the people desperately seek out representatives who are prepared to make up in cruelty what both they and the people lack in conviction.

This is a formula for a nation's or a kingdom's decline, for no kingdom can maintain itself by force alone. Force does not work the way its advocates seem to think it does. [...] the victor can never be the victor: on the contrary, all his energies, his entire life, are bound up in a terror he cannot articulate, a mystery he cannot read, a battle he cannot win—he has simply become the prisoner of the people he thought to cow, chain, or murder into submission. The representatives of the *status quo* are sickened and divided, and dread looking into the eyes of their young; while the excluded begin to realize, having endured everything, that they can endure everything. They do not know the precise shape of the future, but they know that the future belongs to them. They realize this paradoxically—by the failure of the moral energy of their oppressors and begin, almost instinctively, to forge a new morality, to create the principles on which a new world will be built. (Baldwin 1998, 406–07)

As Baldwin observes, when power is illegitimate—when it is merely militaristic and coercive—it is unsustainable, because it relies on the coercive subjugation of the majority who resent being dominated. The purveyors of this kind of illegitimate power, however, do not know any other paradigm of power (“Force does not work the way its advocates seem to think it does”), and so cannot go beyond it. What is more, power when it is illegitimate in this way is joyless and brings no enrichment for even those who have it. As Baldwin writes, those with only such an understanding of power are destined to fail, because “no kingdom can maintain itself by force alone”. Those who wield power-as-force are, furthermore, hostage to the very power they wield. The more they seek to perpetuate it, the more they place themselves in danger and make themselves the enemy of the majority.

Baldwin calls those who see power in these terms as having a “failure of moral energy”. They cannot sustain their power precisely because they do not have moral authority, and it is only a matter of time before those with moral authority and legitimate power will depose them. Baldwin, unlike Pines and Mearsheimer, understands the *de* account of power. It is only *de* power that is real power, as it is this power that has moral authority and is thus sustainable.

Agricultural Metaphysics and Nomadic Metaphysics and Their Differing Understandings of Power

Mearsheimer and Pines’ inability to understand the *de* nature of power is philosophically interesting. In this section, I argue that a reason for the divergence between the dominant Western and Chinese understandings of power—*li* and *de*, respectively—can be understood by the fact that the former was a predominantly nomadic culture whereas the latter was an agricultural civilization. By this, I do not mean a material determinism in which the geography of the land leads to certain socio-economic practices which then leads to certain ideologies. Instead, the material factors and the ideology are mutually reinforcing. Nowhere is this clearer than the case of Europe. As we will note below, European agricultural knowledge was hopelessly primitive relative to China’s for the majority of human history. This contrast is interesting given that Europe has more arable land than China, and thus the issue is not a simple one of material determinism.

The geography and climate of Britain, for example are more than capable of supporting its population—especially when compared to countries like China. It is often reported that around 71% of the UK’s land is arable (What the Science Says 2023). In contrast, only 11.6% of China’s land was classified as arable in 2021 (Trading Economics n.d.). Based on these geographical factors alone, there is little justification to argue that the UK needed to engage in a global programme of looting for its survival. In fact, many former colonial powers such as Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, and Austria are today significant exporters of agricultural products. Remarkably, the Netherlands ranks as the second-largest agricultural exporter in the world after the US, with farming accounting for about 10% of its GDP (Government of the Netherlands n.d.). If anyone could claim a need to loot, it would more plausibly be China, not Britain or other European states. However, today China produces food for a fifth of the world’s population with only 7% of the world’s arable land (Donnellon-May 2023).

In *China: Land of Famine*, Walter Mallory (1892–1980), former director of the Council on Foreign Relations and Secretary of the China International Famine Relief Commission in 1920–1921 writes,

The food problem is an ancient one in China: from the earliest times famines have been an ever recurring scourge. A study recently completed by the Student Agricultural Society of the University of Nanking brought to light the surprising and significant fact that between the years 108 B.C. and 1911 A.D. there were 1,828 famines or nearly every year in some one of the provinces. Untold millions have died of starvation. In fact the normal death rate may be said to contain a constant famine factor. (Mallory 1928, 1)

Here it is important to remember that only large-scale famines tend to be recorded in history, while smaller, less devastating instances of hunger and starvation were a regular part of life in pre-modern China. Even the Chinese philosophical texts we value for their intellectual depth reveal the routine presence of famine and food scarcity.¹¹ While there are many reasons for the persistent hunger throughout China's history, a significant one is the country's relatively inhospitable geography. In contrast, and as noted above, Europe is one of the most naturally advantaged regions in the world, with a mild climate, minimal natural disasters, and abundant rainfall.

The Europeans' disconnection from the land and inability to live off it are evident in the early experiences of the Pilgrims with Native Americans. Upon arriving in what would become the United States, the Pilgrims were taught by the Wampanoag people how to cultivate local crops—specifically, how to plant beans and squash together in mounds surrounded by maize, using fish remains as fertilizer. This indigenous agricultural knowledge played a crucial role in the colony's survival, especially considering that during their first winter in 1620, half of the settlers perished (Silverman 2019, 167).

Whatever the causes, there is a clear lack of agricultural expertise in the European cultures. This lack of agricultural worldview, I argue, is reflected in the ideology of the European colonial powers. These powers overwhelmingly saw value as pre-given and resources as finite, such that the only way for oneself to become more powerful was to take it from others. This contrasts with the Chinese experience in which Chinese culture was an overwhelmingly agricultural one from its earliest periods and throughout dynastic history.

11 In *Mencius* (2009, 1A7), the philosopher advises King Xuan of Qi to adopt a model of benevolent governance. A key aspect of this approach involves ensuring that the people's livelihoods are managed in a way that provides material security (制民之产). Mencius outlines what he considers a materially adequate life: in prosperous years, people should have enough to eat, and in years of poor harvest, they should still be able to avoid starvation. Notably, for Mencius a *good* year is one in which people have enough to eat, while a truly commendable achievement by the ruler is preventing deaths during times of famine. This implies that famine-related deaths were a common occurrence in his time.

Above, we noted Kang's point that the Sinitic states conducted their international relations through a "common conjecture", and it was this that explains the sustained peace between them. The absence of this common conjecture between China and the nomadic, steppes peoples explains the frequency of war between them. We can understand the nature of this common conjecture through articulating the nature of the agriculturalist worldview. A sedentary, farming economy and way of life sees value as something that is cultivated through human agency. Nomadic cultures that do not farm will be more predisposed towards seeing value as a material feature of objects instead of emergent from and contingent upon the way that humans engage with their reality. Under the nomadic paradigm, power, like goods, is a finite resource of predetermined quantity. For anyone to have power means that someone else must necessarily have less of it. This means that the farming way of life sees wealth and value as created through human cultivation as opposed to a predetermined quantity or given that one either possesses or not.

It is a commonplace observation that China was a farming or agricultural civilization. Writing in 1948, Feng Youlan observed that "[e]ven today the portion of the Chinese population engaged in farming is estimated at 75 to 80 percent" (Feng 1948, 17). As the archaeologists Li Liu 刘莉 and Chen Xingcan 陈星灿 show, the emergence of sedentism and the transition to agricultural production as opposed to hunting and foraging was simultaneous with the emergence of a complex society and the formation of the earliest states in the central plains (Liu and Chen 2012). The overwhelming nature of "Chinese" existence has been consistently agricultural from the earliest proto-states in the neolithic era (7000 BCE) until the 20th century, and arguably to present times. As John M. Hobson notes, historically, the Chinese had far better agricultural knowledge than their European counterparts (Hobson 2004, 57). Similarly, as the historian Robert Temple writes, before the 18th century, Western agriculture was "primitive" and "hopeless" in comparison with the advanced Chinese agriculture after the fourth century BCE (Temple 1999, 20). This fact about the entirety of the timeline of Chinese civilization and the almost total domination of this mode of socio-economic life has not attracted enough attention from those who work in the humanities.¹² There are implications to be drawn about how this way of life affected or was in a symbiotic relationship with the core characteristics of "Chinese" or Sinitic culture. The dominance of agriculture as a way of life is consonant with the nature of the Chinese worldview and the nature of statecraft, at both domestic and interstate levels.

Roger Ames, for example, coins the neologism "zoetology" to describe the overwhelming organic-agricultural bent of Chinese metaphysics (Ames 2024). The distinguished philosopher of science, Joseph Needham, also stressed that "the

12 In his *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, Feng Youlan argues that the agricultural way of life impacted the core natures of Chinese philosophy. However, the insights he draws, although arguably correct, are somewhat superficial (Feng 1948, 16–29).

key-word in Chinese thought is *Order* and above all *Pattern* (and, if I may whisper it for the first time, *Organism*)” (Needham 1956, 281). That Chinese metaphysics has its distinguishing characteristics in contrast to the Western tradition is well established (Rošker 2023, 49). There is an overwhelming tendency by *all* the early Chinese philosophers to describe reality in a way that can generally be called organicist.

That the socio-economic way of life of China has a striking convergence with its philosophical outlook has not been well understood in the sinological literature. Roel Sterckx (2015), for example, argues that agriculturalism was so obsessively and almost universally promoted throughout Chinese history because it instilled in the population certain characteristics that were more amenable to the centralized control of the ruler.¹³ Although this is arguably partially true for some of the legalist texts that Sterckx examines,¹⁴ this is an inaccurate account of the deeper reasons why the tradition as a whole was so ideologically committed to agriculturalism. It is doubtful, for example, that Mencius promoted his well-field system (*jingtian* 井田) as the socio-economic basis of his ideal state because the division of agricultural land according to this form of collectively cooperating farming households “produces people with minds receptive to instruction and authority. Plotting land facilitates plotting people and plotting minds” (Sterckx 2015, 216). Sterckx’s conclusion is arbitrary and ignorant, and relies on the hermeneutics of suspicion that I have previously criticized sinologists of lazily appealing to when there is a phenomenon they cannot explain (Xiang 2018; 2025). If, as we have seen, sedentism and agriculturalism are essential to the rise of civilization and complex society, then it is commonsense as to why the ancient Chinese would have thought of agriculture as the productive root (*ben* 本) of society, *tout court*.

As Huang and Kang write, in the Sinitic context, for over 2,500 years, the relationship that obtained between ruler and the ruled was the “responsibility of power”.¹⁵ This Sinitic social contract “reflected basic values and ideas that predated even Confucius and Mencius” and stands in contrast to the fundamental concern of the European social contract—the abuse of power. From the time of the Greeks and Romans through *Magna Carta* to Hobbes and the present day, the fundamental concern of the European social contract was how to limit the ruler’s ability to take advantage of her

13 For example, Sterckx cites a passage from the *Zuozhuan* which uses an agricultural metaphor about divisions in the land as an analogy for why rulership should be disciplined. The analogy being that seeing a thought or action through to its end without digression is analogized to farmers not transgressing their lot of land. Sterckx states that contained in this agricultural metaphor of self-discipline is the “efficient, controlled, and orderly rule” of the peasant (Sterckx 2015, 215–16).

14 See his reference to *Book of Lord Shang* in Sterckx (2015, 222).

15 Whilst there were arguably some institutional constraints on the emperor’s power, for example through the Three Departments and Six Ministries (*Sansheng liubu* 三省六部), the greatest constraint on his power was internal or moral-cultural as opposed to external and institutional.

people (Huang and Kang 2022, 42). The divine right of kings is thus a mere ideological cover that enables extraction from the king's population. This basic difference of rulership as the "responsibility of power" as opposed to the extraction of the people can also be understood via the agriculturalist and nomadic worldviews, respectively. Under the agriculturalist worldview, value can be cultivated. Opening up new land to farm and creative ways of hybridizing different specimens to produce greater yields, for example, can all produce greater yields of farm goods. In essence, one can have more creative relationships with our natural world such that we produce greater value. Nomadic economies do not rely on working the land to the same extent as agricultural societies. Consequently, the notion that value can be actively cultivated does not come naturally to them. As Liu and Chen note, in Chinese archaeological literature, "civilization" is used interchangeably with the term "state" (Liu and Chen 2012, 254). The pioneering Chinese archaeologist Xia Nai 夏鼐 (1910–1985) was the first to explicitly use state and civilization interchangeably when he wrote that "civilization refers to a society in which the clan system has disintegrated and a state organization with class differentiation has formed" (quoted in Liu and Chen 2012, 254). In the history of Chinese state formation, it is sedentary, farming society, the economic surplus this allowed for, and then the rise of class-differentiation that is the basis of civilization/the state. As Xunzi famously wrote, "humans are able to form communities while the animals cannot. Why are humans able to form communities? I say it is because of social divisions" (Hutton 2014, 76). Complex society relies on social organization which, in turn, allows for an unprecedented production of value qualitatively different from that seen in tribal societies. The maintenance of such a complex society, and the continued production of value, relies on both the management and cooperation of the productive population. It is such a socio-economic context that makes sense of the *de* understanding of power. The necessity of such an understanding of power for sustaining such a socio-economic arrangement can be seen when nomadic powers tried to conquer China and were forced to adopt its political worldview and the institutions of state if they wanted to sustainably rule the Sinosphere. As this paper has emphasized, power is only sustainable when it is *de*.

Conclusion

This paper has articulated the *de* understanding of power which is based on the ability to benefit the population under one's authority. An understanding of power solely in terms of domination is unenlightened and arguably mythic. Central to Mearsheimer's concern is the survival of the state. Under the *de* model, the survival of the state is not predicated on the monopolistic and overpowering military power of a state, but instead on a state's ability to benefit others. It is responsibility of power and implicit in this, the provision of public goods, that ensures the sustainability of one's power.

Through an understanding of *de*, we can overcome the mindset that great power politics must necessarily be tragic. Whilst Mearsheimer is correct that China will not be complacent to a subordinate vassal status in the capitalist world system, this does not mean that China will challenge American power in the way that the great powers of the past that he analyses did (Mearsheimer 2001, 4). This is because the dominant Chinese tradition has a fundamentally different understanding of power than the one Mearsheimer operates under. The historical experience of the Sinosphere is that power is only real when it is non-coercive. It is up to powers such as the US to understand China's civilizational experience and the philosophy of *de* distilled from this experience. Indeed, tragedy can only be avoided insofar as powers such as the US and their intellectuals understand the multi-dimensional ramifications of *de*.

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