

The Moral Narrative of the “Secular Great Power with a Global Responsibility”

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Morality and politics

In order to speak about moral narratives of a great power and judge them, we have to establish an understanding of the concept of “morality” and the terms relevant for it. This is particularly necessary because concepts such as morality sometimes have different meanings and contexts in different cultures. Clarifying terms in advance saves us from misunderstandings in retrospect or political practice.

In recent politics, questions of morality and ethics are often compared with so-called factual constraints and questions of power. Politics is, so to speak, caught in the middle and has to mediate between these two sides. Ethics deals scientifically with the possibility of a general justification of morality. In his work “On the discord between morality and politics, with a view to eternal peace” the great Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant says the following about the tension between politics and morality:

Politics says: “Be wise as serpents;” morality adds (as a limiting condition):
“and without guile as doves.”

If the two cannot exist together in one commandment, there really is a dispute between politics and morality; but, if both are to be united, the concept of opposite is absurd and the question as to how this dispute is to be balanced cannot even be posed as a task.¹ Here, Kant refers to the biblical word: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and without guile as doves.” (Matthew, 10, 16)

For Kant, it is clear that one cannot stop at this contradiction between politics and morality. More importantly, Kant distinguishes between a moral

¹ Immanuel Kant, “Zum ewigen Frieden,” in *Kants Werke*, ed. Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968) 8:370.

politician and a moralising politician in this context. The latter does not act in accord with the good, but taking the good as a pretext, he only wants to appear to be good. In other words, this is a matter of hypocrisy.

Now I can conceive of a moral politician, i.e. one who takes the principles of statesmanship in such a way that they can exist together with morality, but not of a political moralist who forges a morality for himself so it works to the statesman's advantage.²

According to Kant, forging morality for oneself in such a way that it lends moral legitimacy to one's own interests is, of course, to be described as immoral or reprehensible.

The deceitfulness of those politicians who orientate themselves on “snake turns of an immoral prudence doctrine” must be exposed. For us, the first task, among other things, is to find out the difference between moralists and moral politicians, to realise...

...that the political moralist begins where the moral politician rightly ends and, by therefore subordinating principles to goals (i.e. putting the horses behind the cart), thwarts his own intention to bring politics into harmony with morality.³

But does the moralist really frustrate his own intention? After all, he argues from a moral point of view only for the sake of appearances; he keeps his true intentions hidden, at least publicly. But can, what might be accomplished by individual politicians, also be achieved by states and world powers?

One thing stands out more clearly than ever in this context, especially with regard to media effectiveness. In politics, the issue of morality is increasingly gaining importance. However, as a result, it is also turning into a power factor, which in turn can lead to ambivalences between morality and politics. The danger of instrumentalising morality in political discourse increases with the importance of moral narratives in politics. Niccolò Machiavelli expressed

² Kant, “Zum ewigen Frieden,” 8:372.

³ Ibid., 8:376.

that bluntly. What he stated in his “Il Principe” no one today would dare to seriously cite as his or her own opinion. Machiavelli says of the prince/ruler:

All that is seen and heard of him must breathe compassion, loyalty, humanity, probity and piety. And nothing is more necessary than the illusion of this last virtue...⁴

But how can reality and appearance be distinguished with certainty in the realm of moral? The hallmark of a subject’s morality is the sphere of inwardness. Whether someone has acted morally or only pretended to do so for utilitarian reasons cannot be proven with absolute certainty, because moral decisions are decisions of conscience, and looking into another person’s conscience is a divine but not a human art. Everyone can only examine his or her own conscience; anything else would be a doomed authoritarian attempt at control. In any case, politics that seeks to control the sphere of conscience is authoritarian and incompatible with our understanding of freedom. George Orwell and many others have set their wits on this. Inwardness is contrasted with empirically ascertainable outwardness. Actions – whether morally motivated or not – have an external side, they can be analysed. A person’s motivation for his or her actions, however, cannot be determined with absolute certainty. We can draw our conclusions about the motivation behind actions from the sum of actions in a particular field of politics. That distinguishing between truthfulness and hypocrisy is critical for the future of political communities is summed up by the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk:

I would venture the guess that societies in which more than fifty per cent of all utterances are spoken on the basis of hypocrisy are doomed in the medium term.⁵

⁴ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe/ Der Fürst* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986), 138–39.

⁵ René Scheu, “50 Prozent Freiheit, 50 Prozent Zwang,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Internationale Ausgabe) February 11, 2021, 17.

Kant raised the question of publicness in this context and attempted a “transcendental formula of public law”:

All actions relating to the right of other people whose maxim is not compatible with publicness are unlawful.⁶

Accordingly, the maxim of the act would have to be able to claim universally binding validity. Morality and publicness appear ambivalent to a certain degree. I can verify the law – as a set of statutory positive laws. All utterances of political communities are to be evaluated as utterances. Despite this fact, moral argumentation is increasingly counted as part of political strategy; moral legitimacy, not to say war of words – or is it serious dialogue?

Distinguishing between law, morality and ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) with regard to state action

The standard for the current analysis is the concept of the freedom of citizens in the state. According to what was said before, the law characterises the external sphere of freedom. Whether an action conforms to the law can be verified. Otherwise, law would not be enforceable. Morality characterises the inner sphere of freedom, the decision of conscience or freedom of conscience. Only the acting person knows whether an action is in line with conscience. Ideally, the external and internal spheres of freedom coincide in political action, this coincidence being understood in the philosophical tradition as the concept of ethical life.

All are equal before the law, as the saying goes. This is precisely the abstraction that law must necessarily make. Apart from taking into account age and external circumstances etc., the law can ultimately only provide a general framework that applies equally to all those subject to it. Acting in accordance with the law is lawful and can, *inter alia*, be examined by a court. Moral action means action according to one’s own decision of conscience; in the extreme or individual case this can also come into conflict with the law. A state whose legal system increasingly comes into conflict with its citizens’ decisions of conscience is fundamentally called into question or loses the consent of its citizens and falters or comes under pressure to

⁶ Kant, “Zum ewigen Frieden,” 8:381.

develop further (cf. evolution or revolution). Insofar as legislation is based on the consciousness of citizens regarding their freedom (law is ideally based on justice) and is therefore principally in harmony with the inner conviction of its citizens, the law is supported by the citizens and, in turn, the law protects the citizens. This harmony between the inner and outer spheres of freedom is contained in and expressed by the concept of ethical life. According to classical philosophy, family and state are the two forms of ethical life.⁷ The spirit that unites them forms the substantial freedom in which the members feel protected in the community, recognised, valued and strengthened in their individual freedom. The state as a system of freedom in the sense of ethical life is (according to its concept) based on the common identity and common will of its citizens. The actions in accordance with ethical life of the citizens of a state spring from this spirit of unity. This is not to be understood as a static or unchanging entity. As the awareness of freedom progresses, the state will develop further, also in legal terms. In this context, the stability of the state is of central importance for China.

From what has been said already, significant differences arise between the narratives of Europe and China, even in relation to the same terms. According to a study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on the developing country China, the country also sees itself as a “moral state”⁸, in which Marxist or “socialist core values have been declared the new moral key factor”. This is a central point in our analysis. Moral action – as we said at the beginning – is characterised by the sphere of inwardness, the action according to a subjective decision of conscience. Can a state system define itself as a moral subject, a moral state, without undermining the so-called balance between citizens and state based on the spirit of unity?

The state is the reality of concrete freedom; but concrete freedom consists in the fact that the single individual and its particular interests have both the complete development and the recognition of their personal right (in the system of the family and of civil society), which through themselves partly pass into the general interest. The principle of modern states has this tremendous strength and depth of allowing the principle of subjectivity to

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 292–512 (§§ 142–360).

⁸ Thomas Heberer and Armin Müller, *Entwicklungsstaat China. Politik, Wirtschaft, sozialer Zusammenhalt und Ideologie*, (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020), 12.

complete itself to the independent extreme of personal particularity and, at the same time, to drive it back into substantial unity and thus preserve the latter in it.⁹

This formulation regarding the aforementioned balance between citizen and state goes back to the great state philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. It presents the principle of the modern state: the principle of subjectivity, which “through itself” passes into the general interest of the state. Hegel even calls this principle the “independent extreme of personal particularity.” Individual freedom is given an inalienable status. In the modern state, the unity of the subjective will of the citizens with the common good or interest of the state becomes apparent through the will of the citizens themselves. Can this be reconciled with the “moral state of China”? The autonomy of the collective – apart from “personal particularity” – especially in the sense of social and political stability enjoys priority in China. All philosophy and religious teachings – “traditionally, no distinction was made in the Chinese language between philosophical and religious theories”¹⁰ – have to...

...interpret the “norms and dogmas (*of the various religions, author’s note*) in such a way that they correspond to the requirements of progress and development of contemporary China,” they are to be guided to orientate themselves towards Chinese specifics and to adapt to the “socialist society” of China. (Renmin-wang 2016; Xi Jinping 2016).¹¹

Regarding which sphere, now, does the Chinese state set the guidelines? In other words, how does the Chinese state see itself in terms of law, morality and ethical life? Are there fundamental differences between the Chinese and the European self-image, and what is the justification of preferring one view to the other? “Unlike in the West, law has traditionally played a rather minor role”¹², according to the authors of the cited study by the Ebert Foundation. Accession to the WTO has contributed to a juridification, mostly in the economic sphere. In general, there has been progress regarding the development of the legal system in China.

⁹ Hegel, *Werke*, 7:406–07 (§ 260).

¹⁰ Heberer and Müller, *Entwicklungsstaat China*, 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

What is lacking above all is the question of the implementation of legal provisions; the law and legal institutions are still regarded as instruments of the enforcement of state interests and not as instruments of the citizens. Lawyers representing people who are considered “enemies of the state” are themselves often accused of anti-state activities.¹³

According to this, the law cannot really be enforced by citizens against the party interests that represent the state interests. Morality, in the self-image of the Chinese Communist Party, is almost equated with the concept of ethical life briefly described above.

In this, we can see a form of direct ethical life as it was found in the original form of the Greek Polis. In Greek antiquity, a good person and a good citizen were regarded as directly identical, congruent. Socrates as the “inventor” of conscience first initiated the division between morality and direct ethical life. For this, the Polis, his hometown Athens, condemned him to death. In the well-known *Phaedo* dialogue, Plato depicts in a literarily romanticised way how Socrates finally drank from the cup of hemlock and died. The “Socratic conscience,” however, has survived the old form of the Greek Polis. Socrates’ “discovery”, so to say, had to establish itself in ethical life over the centuries in both the division and the relationship between law and morality. We know enough historical examples of the conflict between the conscience of individual citizens and state law or action. It is a long way from direct to modern ethical life expressed through the morality of individuals. If, on the other hand, state power dictates what morality is, the aforementioned balance between citizens and state power is missing.

A comparable direct conformity between the external and internal spheres of freedom underlies the enforcement of Chinese Party and State interests, whereas the distinction/separation of or mediation between them is downright essential for the European understanding of freedom and democracy. For the further development of the states’ concept of freedom, this is as essential as the separation of state and religion. This does not mean that state and religion have no relationship to each other. The citizens’ conscience can be shaped on the basis of religious beliefs, which is also relevant for their civil rights and rights of freedom. Due to religious freedom,

¹³ Ibid., 24.

however, this is not moral paternalism exerted by a state that also controls the law – and thus, in China’s case, the external and internal spheres of freedom – or claims representation of both spheres for itself and therefore has a problem of legitimacy before the people as sovereign. Even if China’s official canon of values includes democracy – admittedly interpreted differently than in the West – this means in short: The (Unity) Party is the conscience of the nation. One could give the Chinese Communist Party credit for recognising a “spiritual vacuum”¹⁴ that originated in the West, due to a misconceived separation of state and religion, and experiencing that vacuum as a loss of values and foundations for the state, and therefore attempting to “construct a spiritual civilisation”¹⁵. From a Western perspective, the modern state is not directly legitimised to do this.

An example will illustrate what has been said before. Under the title “Wie Pekings Herrscher eine Filmstar-Ikone abstürzen ließen [How Beijing’s rulers ruined the career of a movie star icon]”, Fabian Kretschmer writes in the newspaper *Die Presse*¹⁶ about a surrogate mother scandal involving the Chinese actress Zheng Shuang. The actress and her partner had hired two surrogate mothers in the USA. However, the legal situation in China concerning this case is unclear.

Although the Ministry of Health has officially banned surrogate motherhood within the country’s borders, there has been no mention in the corresponding statutory provisions so far – a typically vague solution, which is common in China.¹⁷

The actress’ “offence” is therefore not in contradiction with national statutory law. The state has to abide by the law. The national broadcasting authority, however, has announced that the actress “will be banned from the country’s television screens and radio airwaves”¹⁸. For the *Die Presse* correspondent, “her case also demonstrates the self-image of the Communist Party, which sees itself not only as a guardian of the law, but also as a moral

¹⁴ Heberer and Müller, *Entwicklungsstaat China*, 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Fabian Kretschmer, “Wie Pekings Herrscher eine Filmstar-Ikone abstürzen ließen,” *Die Presse*, January 26, 2021, 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹⁸ Ibid., 12.

authority”.¹⁹ China’s much-described so-called “social credit system,” which is supposed to measure the trustworthiness of citizens, further increases the power of the state and the ruling Unity Party vis-à-vis the citizens. In this sense, Western media would also be ill-advised to hastily attribute to politicians or public figures the status of “moral authorities.” These personalities may appeal to the conscience of the citizens, but the moral authority par excellence is the individual’s conscience, which is inaccessible from the outside.

Linking traditional Chinese culture with communist ideology

What has been described in the previous chapter may be summarised under the notion of direct or unreflected, not further in itself differentiated, ethical life. How did this come about, given China’s long historical and cultural tradition and the relatively short but “profound” and fundamental imprint of communist thought in China’s organisation of the state? Is there a bridge or even a certain continuity between China’s traditional constitutionality and the People’s Republic of China in the 21st century? Could such a “systemic change” even take place without a certain continuity?

In order to answer these questions and also to better understand the problems presented in the previous chapter, it is worthwhile to take a look at the remarks of the already quoted philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770 - 1831) on China in his lectures on the philosophy of history. Loosely based on Hegel, everyone is a child of his or her time, as is his philosophical view on history – also with regard to the state of knowledge at the time. For the analysis and assessment of the extent to which there is continuity between millennia-old Chinese culture and the communist China of today, Hegel’s remarks are in any case an excellent source for any basic research in this field.

History has to begin with the Chinese empire, for it is the oldest as far as history can tell, and its principle is of such substantiality that it is, at the same time, the oldest and the newest for this empire. At an early stage, already, we see China growing into the shape it is in now; as the opposition of objective being and subjective movement towards being is still missing, all changeability is impossible, and the abiding, which eternally reappears,

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

replaces what we would call the historical. China and India still lie, as it were, outside world history, history as the prerequisite of the moments whose interconnection only becomes its living progress. The unity of substantiality and subjective freedom is therefore without distinction and opposition of both sides that precisely because of this, the substance is unable to reflection in itself and reach subjectivity. Thus, the substantial, which appears as the ethical life, does not rule as the convictions of the subject, but as despotism of the ruler.²⁰

So much for a glimpse on the China of days gone by. The “stationary condition” of China and India has been disrupted in more recent times; both states have become “players” in world politics, especially in times of (economic and technical) globalisation. More than one third of the world’s population lives in these two countries. The ponderousness but also constancy of these countries in the past may partly also be due to their gigantic size and population. Hegel begins the observation of world history with China; the further historical development heads towards the West (Oriental, Greek, Roman and finally Christian cultures). This geographically visible progress finally ends in the United States of America as the representative of the leading culture still valid today. The cultural progress beginning in the East and ending in the West has now come to an end in this form; the circle is closed; globalisation heralds a new era of historical development. A worldwide reciprocal system of relations between states and powers characterises the further course of history and the struggle for supremacy. Globalisation is not just an economic-technical struggle, but a competition of norms and systems.²¹ The adoption of communist thinking as a “world view” in China is itself already a first step in the already started globalisation, the adoption of a “European” ideology in the Far East. It is remarkable that this ideology was not so successful in the West, which in turn has not only historical reasons but also, as outlined below, logical reasons.

According to the Marxist theory of historical stages of development of society, feudalist society is to be followed by capitalist society, socialist society and, finally, communist society. The historical change of property

²⁰ Hegel, *Werke*, 12:147.

²¹ Cf. also Micha Brumlik, “Der Kampf der Weltanschauungen“, *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, no. 10 (October 2020): 81–90.

relations is the dominant factor here. A central concept is bourgeois society. The French Revolution abolished feudal property in favour of bourgeois property. Communism abolishes bourgeois and, thus, private property altogether. The Communist Manifesto of 1848 states:

The Communists turn their attention chiefly to Germany because that country is on the eve of a bourgeois revolution and because it is to be carried out under more advanced conditions of European civilisation and with a much more developed proletariat than that of England and France in the seventeenth and, respectively, eighteenth century, the bourgeois revolution in Germany can only be but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution.²²

However, Marx misjudged these advanced conditions in bourgeois society. The concept of bourgeois society in Hegel's philosophy – from where Marx took the term – is antecedent to the concept of state and does not represent the substantial generality as represented by the state. In bourgeois society, an external competitive relationship between individuals dominated by economic principles prevails; in the state, however, the citizens are connected in the sense of ethical life. According to classical philosophy, the economy is to be an expedient to the self-sufficiency of the state and its citizens. Although bourgeois society is one of the necessary foundations of freedom within a modern state system, it is embedded and regulated in the state, the state being the spirit of unity of its citizens. In the Communist Manifesto, however, we read: "The workers have no fatherland."²³ If we assume that the state acts in an integrative way while the market is expansive, Marx presented a questionable pattern of identity with his absolutizing concept of society. Apparently, Hegel already saw something like this dawning:

If the state is mistaken for bourgeois society and its purpose is placed in the security and protection of property and personal freedom, then the interest of individuals as such is the ultimate end for which they are united, and it equally follows from this that it is something arbitrary to be a member of the state.²⁴

²² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 4 (Berlin/DDR: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1959), 493.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4:490.

²⁴ Hegel, *Werke*, 7:399 (remark to § 258).

Marx' theses are based on this "confusion" of the outwardly remaining connection of the individuals within a society, and their connection in the way of ethical life within the state. However, the market's expansive pursuit of development is somewhat more accurately reflected in the Communist Manifesto – in contrast to the alleged lack of homeland or state identity of the worker:

The national separation and contrasts between the peoples are disappearing more and more with the development of the bourgeoisie, the freedom of trade, the world market, the uniformity of industrial production, and the living conditions corresponding to it.²⁵

By contrast, with Hegel we would say: With regard to dignity, civil rights and liberties of citizens, and their cultural identity, the exorbitance and boundlessness of the market must be abolished by politics and the very purpose of freedom in the state. Since communism was conceived as internationalist from the outset, Marx chose the concept of state or nation as a temporary vehicle at best leading to international classless society, as actor on the world stage, replacing the state in the sense of ethical life. According to this, progress in history is not – as with Hegel – a result of the competition between states (and their understanding of freedom), but rather to the inconsistencies in the property situation (of bourgeois society). As we will see below, this lack of deepening of the concept of state has also continued in China's current political system. In China, the bourgeois revolution was "skipped," so to speak. Communism – in contradiction to Marx' theses – was essentially able to gain a foothold where the bourgeois revolution had not taken place and the associated civil liberties had not been established. Thus, these states cannot do without restrictive measures against their own citizens or, respectively, a corresponding system of control.

The parts of Hegel's consideration of ancient Chinese culture we can still consider valid today regarding the country's continuity are his statements about the lack of contradiction "of objective being and subjective movement towards the being", that there is a unity "of substantiality and subjective freedom", still "without distinction and opposition of both sides, and that precisely because of this, the substance is unable to reach reflection in itself

²⁵ Marx and Engels, *Werke*, 4:479.

and reach subjectivity. Thus, the substantial, which appears as the ethical life, does not rule as the convictions of the subject, but as despotism of the ruler.” Similar to the Greek Polis and unlike Socrates, ancient China lacked the “discovery” of conscience, which subsequently went down in history as conscience formed by Christianity.

Hence, Hegel is able to conclude about the condition or state organisation of ancient China:

We now pass from this data in Chinese history to the consideration of the spirit of the constitution, which has always remained the same. It results from the general principle. For the latter is the direct unity of the substantial spirit and the individual; but this is the family spirit, which here is extended to the most populous country. The moment of subjectivity, that is, the self-reflection of the individual will set against the substance, as the power consuming it, or the recognition of this power as the individual's own essence, in which it knows itself free, is not yet present here. The general will is directly active through the individual. [...] This family basis is also the basis of the constitution, if one can speak of such a thing. For although the emperor has the right of a monarch who stands at the top of a whole state, he exercises it in the manner of a father over his children. He is the patriarch and heaped upon him is all that can claim reverence in the state. For the emperor is also the head of religion and science, [...] This paternal care of the emperor and the spirit of his subjects as children, who do not step out of the moral family circle and cannot gain independent and civil freedom for themselves, make the whole one empire, government and conduct...²⁶

The above-mentioned “direct” unity of the substantial spirit and the individual characterises the “direct” form of ethical life. In the family, it is logically present in a more direct form. In love, in the feeling of togetherness of the family members, they understand themselves “essentially” as members, therefore, not as singular persons.²⁷ According to Hegel, a modern state rises above direct ethical life. However, according to what has been said, this was precisely the case in ancient China, where the family form of ethical life was applied to the state's unity. The patriarchal form of family structure was applied to the state form.

²⁶ Hegel, *Werke*, 12:152–56.

²⁷ Ibid., 7:307–08 (§ 158).

Yet, the modern concept of ethical life – so the key statement – cannot stay with this directness. Normally, when growing up, the individual family member steps out of the family unit into independence and becomes a member of society as a free citizen; by doing that, however, he has just brought his own subjective interests to bear against others and can start his own family. Only in the state that regulates bourgeois society has he transformed his direct ethical life into ethical life mediated through bourgeois society, through the formation of individual interests. As a member of the state, as a state citizen he is settled within a greater general than the family was and continues to be. In the modern state, the individual leads a general life, but one that is “mediated” and he or she thus knows that his or her individual rights as well as his freedom of conscience are recognised also in distinction or demarcation from state interests.

By contrast, Hegel sees the situation in ancient China as follows:

The other matter is the imperial administration. We cannot speak of a constitution here for that would mean individuals and corporations have independent rights, partly in relation to their particular interests, partly in relation to the whole state. This element must be missing here, and we can only speak of an imperial administration. China is the empire of absolute equality, and all differences that exist are only possible through the imperial administration and the dignity that each person attributes to himself to attain a high level in this administration. Because in China there is equality, but no freedom, despotism is the necessarily given mode of government. With us, men are equal only before the law and in the respect that they own property; besides, they have many interests and many peculiarities, which must be guaranteed if freedom is to exist for us. In the Chinese empire, however, these special interests are not rightful in themselves, and the government merely lies with the emperor, who leads it as a hierarchy of officials or mandarins.²⁸

The equality before the law “with us” referred to by Hegel is anchored in the recognition of the citizens of the state as free and equal. In this context and in accordance with the Kantian categorical imperative, the civic individual as a human being is fundamentally never to be regarded merely as a means to an end, but always also as an end in itself. This provision raises the

²⁸ Hegel, *Werke*, 12:157–58.

connection between freedom and equality to a level that springs from a Christian concept of the human being. The central statement in Hegel's previous quotation is the lack of rights of individuals and corporations with regard to the power of the state and the "priority" of equality over freedom in ancient China. We are reminded of the situation in contemporary China outlined in the previous chapter, the difficulties in asserting rights vis-à-vis the (moral) state, which is ultimately represented by the Unity Party. In this respect, the need to point out parallels between imperial China and the Chinese world power of today seems obvious. The hierarchy within the Party and among its dependent state officials has almost taken the form or significance of the former imperial power and its state officials in terms of the absence of civil liberties or recognition of individual freedom of conscience. The problem of transferring family structures, i.e. direct ethical life, to the state sphere has not been eradicated in China to this day.

We have heard from Hegel that the emperor in ancient China was also "head of religion and science." In the previous chapter it was stated that, in today's China, norms and dogmas are to be interpreted in such a way by science and religions "that they correspond to the requirements of progress and development of contemporary China," and that they are to be oriented towards Chinese specifics and adapted to China's "socialist society." Thus, in contemporary China as well, freedom of science and the practice of religion are subordinated to (the purposes of) state power. Far from justifying this fact, but in terms of recognising the continuity of a tradition that has lasted for thousands of years, recognition of the latter serves to better understand China and its politics today.

That Chinese religion, therefore, cannot be what we call religion. For to us, religion is the inwardness of the spirit in itself, in that it imagines in itself what is its innermost being. In these spheres, therefore, man is also withdrawn from the relationship with the state and, taking refuge in inwardness, is able to escape from the power of worldly regiment. But religion in China is not on this level, for true faith is only possible where individuals are in themselves, independent of an external driving force.²⁹

²⁹ Ibid., 12:166.

Despite the difficulty of speaking scientifically about “true faith” in view of the cultural relativism rampant in the West – Hegel speaks on the basis of the Christian religion – a reference to the Chinese state power’s treatment of the Uyghurs is necessary. The Uyghurs are currently targeted by the Chinese government as an ethnic minority, but first and foremost as an Islamic religious community. “In a secret series of speeches, later leaked with other documents to the *New York Times*, Head of state and Party leader Xi Jinping spoke in 2014 of the “poison of religious extremism,” according to him, China has to wage a merciless fight against terrorism, infiltration and separatism (cf. texts of his speech).”³⁰ The fight against religious extremism is also an issue in the so-called Western world. The terrorist attacks of the Islamist network al-Qaida on September 11, 2001 in the United States of America are rooted in international collective memory. In public discourse, there have been many discussions about the concept of political Islam, the question of distinguishing between Islam and Islamism, etc. On Wikipedia we read, among other things: “In the history of Islam, there has been neither a complete separation of state and religion nor a complete unity of religion and everyday practice.”³¹ Without wanting to go into this complex topic, we will only focus on the statement that there has not been a complete separation of state and religion in the history of Islam. If this is the case, are we again dealing with “direct ethical life”? This would explain some of the difficulties enlightened societies have with Islam. In China, in the case of the oppression of the Uyghurs, one form of direct ethical life would thus be the fighting against another. In order to understand China’s policy, without legitimising it, we have to understand that a country like China, for which stability and thus internal and external sovereignty have top priority, tries to nip possible dangers emanating from radical Islam in the bud by fighting it mercilessly in the own country. From this perspective, international criticism of the treatment of the Uyghurs is dismissed as interference in internal affairs. The fact that the USA and the EU have drawn completely different conclusions with regard to dealing with Islamist terror results, among other things, from the clear separation of state and religion.

³⁰ Katrin Büchenbacher et al., “Sie sagten, der Islam sei ein Virus, von dem wir geheilt werden müssten,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Internationale Ausgabe), March 27, 2021, 5.

³¹ “Politischer Islam,” *Wikipedia*, last modified May 21, 2021, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politischer_Islam.

Finally, Hegel's view of science in the state of direct ethical life:

If, on the one hand, the sciences seem to be highly honoured and cultivated, they lack, on the other hand, precisely that free ground of inwardness and the actual scientific interest that makes them a theoretical occupation. A free, ideational realm of the spirit has no place here, and what can be called scientific here is of an empirical nature and stands essentially in the service of what is useful for the state and the state's and its citizen's needs.³²

The danger of a concept of education that gives priority to the utilitarian aspect, i.e. putting training before general education, is also of universal importance against the background of evaluating Chinese and Western narratives.

Despite all the continuity in Chinese culture, it should be noted that the sleeping giant China has awakened. What Hegel in his time described as abiding no longer applies in this generality. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Qing dynasty lay in ruins. A new beginning characterised by globalisation was already emerging. Not only through the economy and its inherent contradiction according to communist ideology, did the idea of development and progress enter Chinese culture.

In the so-called Mao Bible ("Little Red Book") we read:

The new social order must be consolidated step by step. Its final consolidation requires not only the realisation of the socialist industrialisation of the country and the persistent continuation of the socialist revolution on the economic front, but also the constant, untiring struggle for the socialist revolution on the political and ideological front and the implementation of socialist education. To this end, the interaction of various international conditions is also necessary.³³

In addition to modern industry and agriculture, modern science and culture are to be developed and the look is to turn to the international stage. This is an awakening of a country rich in tradition, which encompasses all areas of social and state life and subjects them to a "modernisation process." It

³² Hegel, *Werke*, 12:169.

³³ Mao Tse-tung, *Worte des Vorsitzenden Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1967), chap. III.

happens in the awareness that this development will continue over a long period of history. In this sense, the Chinese Communist Party does not shy away from presenting China as a developing country – a narrative that can have different meanings and hopefully leaves a door open for the further development of China’s political culture. After Mao, China was prepared, at least in economic terms, to partially abandon communist dogmas and has also been successful in doing so.

Examples of Chinese and Western moral narratives

What do the (inter alia Western) narratives on China – circulating in our media during China’s rise to a world power and its role as a central player in the global economy mean against this background? Is there anyone among us who has not often purchased a product made in China or rather in the People’s Republic of China (which already brings us to a fundamental political narrative), perhaps even for lack of (affordable) alternatives? From a general political point of view, by now, we can speak of European dependence on the Chinese economy. China has become an almost indispensable producer and supplier of products, as well as an indispensable market for European products, even under unequal competitive conditions, which is again due to the specific political framework conditions.

In the *Standard* newspaper of January 1, 2021, Philipp Mattheis took a hard look at China’s Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with the EU, which had just received a first political approval. Beijing, or rather the state-owned newspaper *Global Times*, called the agreement a “gift to the world”. This Chinese narrative conveys the self-confidence of the People’s Republic of China as a global power and, at the same time, China’s benevolence. According to Chinese understanding, the concept of a gift involves the interest in a functioning cooperation in the sense of mutual give and take (keyword: reciprocity culture). What, on the other hand, is the media echo in the West or the narrative of the Western media? Mattheis called it a “gift for Beijing” and mainly put the resulting better market access for European companies in China – with “unfair trade practices such as joint venture coercion in key industries” remaining unchanged – in relation to the context of human rights violations in China, the EU’s transatlantic relations and European values.

But the agreement becomes a farce, when top politicians concoct a deal behind closed doors with a state whose human rights violations reached a low point just in the past year. The leadership in Beijing is cramming hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs into labour camps. Hong Kong's autonomy has de facto ended, democracy activists have been sentenced to draconian prison terms. Yes, European companies now have a little more legal certainty in the world's largest market. But the price for the agreement is high for the EU has alienated its transatlantic partner and betrayed its values for its sake.³⁴

Between the “gift to the world” and the betrayal of values, there is a gap in the political-moral assessment that could hardly be larger.

Christoph B. Schiltz blew the same horn in his commentary at *welt.de* entitled “The Merkel-Xi agreement is a mockery of freedom fighters”:

When will Europe finally start to understand China? The regime acts according to the principle of Tianxia (everything under one sky), with everything oriented towards the Middle Kingdom (“Reich der Mitte”). The goal of the industrial strategy “Made in China 2025” is therefore not a competition between partners, but the state-orchestrated elimination of international competition in all markets in the coming decades.³⁵

Now there is a significant difference between being politically responsible for the German economy or the economic prospects of the EU in China, on the one hand, and writing a political commentary in a newspaper, on the other hand. On the newspaper market, too, every newspaper has its political tendencies. In any case, international (economic) relations cannot be guided only by moral categories. The question of whether this is about uniting “everything under one sky” or “everything under the Middle Kingdom” is, however, also of relevance to security policy and concerns the nerve of the sovereignty of states and of the EU as a state community. The rejection of

³⁴ Philipp Mattheis, “EU-Abkommen mit China: Ein Geschenk für Peking,” *Der Standard*, January 1, 2021, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000122885465/eu-abkommen-mit-china-ein-geschenk-fuer-pekking>.

³⁵ Christoph B. Schiltz, “Das Merkel-Xi-Abkommen ist ein Hohn für die Freiheitskämpfer,” *Die Welt*, January 2, 2021, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article223637610/EU-Vertrag-mit-China-Das-Merkel-Xi-Abkommen-ist-ein-Hohn-fuer-die-Freiheitskaempfer.html>.

the above-mentioned investment deal was, among other things, a topic at the Group of Seven (G7) meeting at the beginning of May 2021. The EU parliament froze the ratification of the CAI agreement. “One has suspended the path to ratification of the investment deal with China, due to quarrels with China,” said the Vice President of the European Commission: “The environment is not conducive to the ratification of the agreement.” In this context US Foreign Minister Blinken addressed the narrative of a liberal world order:

“What we are trying to do is to uphold the international rules-based order that our countries have invested so much in over so many decades to the benefit, I would argue, not just of our own citizens, but of people around the world – including, by the way, China,” Blinken said.³⁶

The fact that the vying – also in the sense of positive competition – between states “takes place” on different political levels, and that the media or narrative “venue” is becoming increasingly important in addition to the economic one, means that security policy must also devote more attention to this issue.

In this context, the *FAZ* even spoke of the “battle of narratives”:

While French hospitals are on the verge of collapse in the face of the flood of seriously ill Covid-19 patients, Ambassador Lu Shaye sends “Reflections of a Chinese Diplomat in Paris.” “Why can’t old democracies in Europe and America bring the epidemic under control?” he asks, seemingly worried, only to immediately present the “individualism” and “egoism of the West” as the explanation. Asian countries are “particularly powerful” in the fight against Covid-19 because they have a community spirit and civic-mindedness that Western democracies have lost. South Korea, Japan and Singapore have done well, the ambassador writes, but what really stands out is the performance of the People’s Republic of China, whose regime has stood the test of time.³⁷

³⁶ “G7-Treffen: Eine Allianz gegen Moskau und Peking,” *Die Presse*, May 4, 2021, 4.

³⁷ Friederike Böge, Michaela Wiegel and Matthias Wyssuwa, “Wie China die europäischen Demokratien verhöhnt,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/corona-krise-wie-china-europas-demokratien-verhoeht-16705688.html>.

The central narrative here – apart from the otherwise mostly cultivated narrative of raising the standard of living of the population – is that the political system proves itself in the event of a crisis. The legitimacy of the political system is derived, among other things, from this. The Chinese ambassador in Paris makes no secret of presenting China’s political system in this regard as superior to the democracies of the Western world. In the *FAZ* he is also cited as follows:

Many people greatly admire the success of Chinese governance. They envy the efficiency of our political system and hate their own country’s inability to succeed in the same way, he clarifies. Thus, he says, “the label of dictatorship has been attached” to China by others, only to avoid the question why their own country has failed. Contrary to the alleged “beacon of democracy,” the United States, it is China that is helping eighty countries to overcome the crisis. The Chinese embassy in France sent out these “reflections” ten thousand times via the Twitter messaging service.³⁸

Arguably, this highlights a central political and moral narrative of the Chinese leadership. The alleged failure of democracy, supposedly characterised by individualism and egoism – there is, of course, a world of difference between the two terms – is ultimately contrasted with China’s political system, which is purportedly characterised by community spirit, civic-mindedness and efficiency. International relations must then also be judged under this paradigm. The EU as a community of states relies on individual freedom rights and democracy as basic values of state and community action. According to Kant’s formula quoted above, the maxim of the EU as well as that of the Chinese leadership seem to be compatible with publicity. The latter maxim is being morally justified, on the one hand, and explained with the pragmatic side of political efficiency, on the other hand. Systemic efficiency and communality are interrelated; what is the use of communality if the political system is inefficient? Both together make for a strong political system, according to the Chinese narrative.

Of course, this narrative can be analysed in terms of the contradictions it contains. Genuine human sympathy requires the highest degree of consideration of individuality. Community spirit presupposes – apart from the complex concept of spirit, which is in any case complex in German – the

³⁸ Böge, Wiegel and Wyssuwa, “China.”

differentiation of diversity and, at the same time, the unity of this diversity, if not a mass-uniform unity is meant, which may, admittedly, easily be steered or controlled. It makes the art of governing look less impressive. Democracy can be exhausting and may drag out decision-making processes, which is accepted in favour of freedom and civil rights. So, the democracy debate cannot be ignored when comparing the narratives. In general, the question of the compatibility of political-moral narratives with publicity will also have to be assessed in the context of the power of the media, their independence, and the associated guidelines of cultural identity.

Religious freedom aside, the central position of the subject in the political system, also propagated by the Enlightenment, is an achievement on which the legitimacy of the political culture of the so-called West is based. The increase in individualisation – as long as it is not understood as arbitrary freedom – within a political-cultural liberal system united by a sense of community is the yardstick for the idea of progress of the ‘West’. But not only of the West – so the claim. Olaf Wientzek and Sebastian Enskat write in the *NZZ* of December 17, 2020 about “the liberal world order: saving what can be saved” (*Die liberale Weltordnung: retten, was zu retten ist*):

It ultimately seems paradoxical that the liberal world order is in a deep crisis, although multilateralism is invoked everywhere. However, when Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping speak of multilateralism, they mean something completely different than Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. In the West, the term is (or was) associated with all those principles and values that underlie the liberal world order. For authoritarian state leaders, on the other hand, multilateral organisations are primarily instruments to gain national and international legitimacy for their own authoritarian practices.³⁹

After the end of the Cold War, the rise of China thus seems to once again call into question the principles and values of a liberal world order in general and within the international power structure. The regret of the two authors of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation about the “argumentative disarmament” of “the global West” almost seems to carry resignation. Values must not be sacrificed to economic interests; after all, “it is not least the

³⁹ Olaf Wientzek and Sebastian Enskat, “Retten, was zu retten ist – Joe Biden, Europa und die liberale Weltordnung,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Internationale Ausgabe), December 17, 2020, 13.

normative radiance and credibility of the West on which its weal and woe now depend all the more.”⁴⁰ In this résumé of the authors, the moral claim that values should not be sacrificed to the economy is not so much in the foreground again, but rather the basis of the West’s existence is generally linked to the implementation of a liberal order of values. The message is: The survival of the liberal world order is at stake.

In democratic countries, it is seen as a challenge that “economic growth and social development are possible even without democracy and freedom of expression.”⁴¹ In the West, it seems that until now progress as a whole has been assumed to be linked to individual freedoms and democracy. The collapse of the Soviet system was judged in this light. China is different – is it not?

A look back to China’s recent history makes clear the tremendous upheavals in a relatively short time, but also raises hopes for further development.⁴² Economic liberalisation without democratisation also seems to be successful. Admittedly, success can be defined or specified in different ways.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁴¹ Kretschmer, “Der Triumph,” 3.

⁴² China experienced a very short period of republic between empire and communist rule; the impoverishment of the masses could not be controlled during this unstable period of upheaval. Sun Yat-sen is revered today as the founder of modern China in both the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. Sun Yat-sen's party merged several times with various other political parties until he founded the Guomindang. The party founded the first Chinese republic in 1912, gained rule over mainland China in 1927, but after losing the civil war against the Communist Party in 1949, it had to retreat to the island of Taiwan. Today it is part of the democratic multi-party system on Taiwan. The Guomindang initially represented a broad spectrum of political opinions and was at first the only political party one could join to engage in politics in China. Later, the only alternative was between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Sun Yat-sen had supported an alliance with the Communist Party, while Chiang Kai-shek, Sun's successor in the party leadership after his death, rejected cooperation. After the defeat in the struggle against the Communists, Chiang Kai-shek proclaimed the government of the Republic of China on Taiwan at the end of 1949. Under the presidency of his son Chiang Ching-kuo, the democratisation of Taiwan began. On the Chinese mainland, on the other hand, Mao Zedong consolidated the power of the Communist Party. After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping set the country on a capitalist course economically and initiated China's rise to a major global power. Deng admired models of political order such as that of Singapore, which combined strong state authority and economic freedoms.

Even if small and now democratic Taiwan, thanks to high economic growth, has rapidly developed its economic and technological capacities in recent decades, the People's Republic of China, which is disproportionately larger and more populous, is today increasingly flexing its muscles in the concert of the great powers.

The CP cultivates a nationalist-patriotic narrative with regard to Taiwan, which has become even more acute under Xi Jinping. According to it, the island is a renegade province, which, according to the party leader, must be annexed to China by force if necessary.⁴³

Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) emphasises Taiwan's de facto independence. The example of Hong Kong serves as a warning to the Taiwanese people against becoming too closely aligned or even united with mainland China. Taiwan thus offers the People's Republic of China the look in a "critical" mirror, in which a successful Chinese democracy based on the Western model is visible or realised. Further, it should be clear to the West since the People's Republic took over Hong Kong that the "one country – two systems" narrative propagated by Deng Xiaoping at the time, also with regard to Taiwan, has become obsolete.⁴⁴

Under the title "Der Triumph der ungeliebten Weltmacht" [The triumph of the unloved world power] in *Die Presse* of December 31, 2020, the West is also ascribed a certain impotence in dealing with the great power of the People's Republic of China.

"We have to live with a China that actually exists – and not with a China that we wish would exist," says political scientist Kishore Mahbubani from Singapore, who has been proclaiming the "Asian century" for years. With mischievous passion, he points to Western arrogance in trying to shape the world's most populous country according to its values: "Why does a country like the USA, with less than 250 years of history and a quarter of China's population, think it can change China – and not the other way around?"⁴⁵

⁴³ Steffen Richter, "Unausgesprochener Schutz," *Die Zeit*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2020-09/china-taiwan-konflikt-usa-schutzmacht-diplomatische-beziehung-autonomie>.

⁴⁴ Burkhard Bischof, "'Taiwan befindet sich direkt an der Frontlinie.' Interview mit Joseph Wu," *Die Presse*, December 29, 2020, 2-3.

⁴⁵ Kretschmer, "Der Triumph," 3.

With this statement, however, the political scientist from Singapore focuses only on quantitative categories, without referring to any progress in the awareness of freedom as a criterion. To answer his question, we have to look at the principle of freedom as the essence of our political thinking. Does the West have the “charisma and credibility” to determine progress in history in a general, binding and arguable way that is equivalent to the legitimisation of a liberal world order? If so, moral argumentation alone is in any case not sufficient for the realisation of this freedom.

Even if the so-called Mao Bible has lost some of its appeal, let us look a little closer at two statements by Mao Zedong and make a concluding reflection on the contradiction in the basic understanding of a “world order” and its security policy implications.

In my view, a new turning point has occurred in the international situation. There are now two air currents in the world: the east wind and the west wind. There is a Chinese proverb that says: “Either the east wind surpasses the west wind, or the west wind surpasses the east wind.” I think the peculiarity of the present situation is that the east wind has gained the upper hand over the west wind, that is, the socialist forces are absolutely superior to the imperialist forces.⁴⁶

In this statement, Mao could still categorise the ideological ally Soviet Union as belonging to the east wind, although, at the time already, the alienation between the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union became noticeable. Today, the confrontation has shifted to one between China and the US. All the sabre-rattling of the USA towards Russia does not measure up to the actually relevant power play of the great powers. China is on the verge of overtaking the USA as the largest economy. It is not about the question of who is rightly accusing whom of imperialism or not. It is part of the concept of a world power to assert its influence as far as possible. China is on the advance in this respect, the USA in a somewhat defensive position. Both competing systems *de facto* claim international validity or dominance. The EU, as a transatlantic partner, is not in equidistance, however, without having to assert itself as a leading world power.

⁴⁶ Mao Tse-tung, *Worte des Vorsitzenden*, chap. VI.

There is a saying about the wind blowing its own way. It is the freedom of the spirit that prevails according to this proverb. Who is able to make concrete predictions with regard to a possible peaceful resolution of the conflict or a military escalation of the antagonism described? In what form will the described conflict, which is currently intensifying, be fought in the future?

The contradictions and the struggle are general, absolute, but the methods of resolving the contradictions, that is, the forms of struggle, differ according to the character of the contradictions. Some contradictions have an openly antagonistic character, others do not. Depending on the concrete development of things, some originally non-antagonistic contradictions become antagonistic, while others, originally antagonistic, become non-antagonistic contradictions. The central task and the highest form of revolution is the armed seizure of power, is the solution of the problem through war. This revolutionary principle of Marxism-Leninism has general validity; it applies everywhere, in China as abroad.⁴⁷

Thus spoke the “great leader” in 1937. Contradiction thus seems to be a necessary moment of development or progress. Whether nuclear deterrence contributes to the fact that war, the armed conduct of conflict, has taken second place “in favour” of other ways of conducting conflict, or whether the forms of conflict between states have become more subtle, not to say more cooperative, taken as a whole – the central conflict for us on the world stage has become obvious in recent years. The means of conflict resolution are economic, technical and narrative by nature.

Taiwan is more than just a touchstone for a face-off between the USA and China. In line with geostrategic considerations, it is about the competition of systems of world order. From the perspective of the European Union and with regard to cooperation but also to the remaining differences and disputes between the US, the EU and China, priority must of course be given to dialogue, to the negotiating table, away from any military confrontation. Of course, never at the price of giving up the position of a liberal world order. This, too, must be further developed through dialogue and international efforts at persuasion. Science and culture not only serve peaceful exchange and encounter, they also represent a certain concept of

⁴⁷ Ibid., chap. IV-V.

humanity and freedom. The once powerful ideologue and propaganda chief Li Changchun, henchman of former Chinese leader Jiang Zemin, urged the Chinese media years ago to be “even better at propagating the Party’s point of view:”

Those who have the most modern means of propagating their culture can all the better influence the world and spread their values.⁴⁸

Science and culture, however, should not be misused as a means of transporting party-political goals or for propaganda, but ultimately have their purpose in the education of the human being, his or her freedom in the sense of the Kantian concept of Enlightenment. Much will depend on the extent to which truth and truthfulness instead of hypocrisy prevail in the education and politics of the West and to what extent Europe – which is, after all, not uninvolved in the export of communist ideology to China – can adopt a mediating role with regard to the different concepts of freedom. However, the commitment to a so-called liberal value and world order must not be limited to the transatlantic partners. Globalisation demands an international dialogue of narratives, for which a modern form of self-assurance is needed rather than cultural relativism. The will and the ability to engage in dialogue should not be denied to either side. The competition of systems will go on, and narratives will continue to be used. May it be a constructive competition.

⁴⁸ Johnny Erling, “China kämpft gegen ‘geschmacklose’ TV-Unterhaltung,” *Die Welt*, October 31, 2011, <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article13690075/China-kaempft-gegen-geschmacklose-TV-Unterhaltung.html>.