

## Summary

Modern liberal democracies are facing deep structural crises, characterized by the rise of right-wing populism, political instability, and a fracturing global order. Chinese academic **Tongdong Bai** argues that these crises stem from two fundamental errors: conflating democracy with liberalism domestically, and relying on flawed nation-state or cosmopolitan models internationally. As an alternative, Bai proposes a **Confucian framework**—a meritocratic mixed regime for domestic governance and a humaneness-based *tianxia* hierarchy for international relations—to strike a sustainable balance between realism and idealism.

## 1. The Domestic Crisis: Balancing Liberalism and Democracy

The common anxiety that democracy is collapsing due to the rise of populist parties is a misunderstanding. These parties are gaining traction through legitimate democratic elections. The true issue is the erosion of **liberalism** (the rule of law and minority rights) by **democracy** (the unchecked rule of the majority, or the "tyranny of the majority").

To restore this balance, Bai proposes a constitutionalism-based **Confucian mixed regime**. While democrats believe governance should be *by* the people, Confucians argue that while the state exists *for* and *of* the people, the masses lack the expertise required to make complex political decisions.

### The Confucian Hybrid Model

This framework advocates for a bicameral legislature:

- **Lower House:** Democratically elected to allow the public to express satisfaction or grievances.
- **Upper House:** Meritocratically selected to ensure high-quality, good-for-all decision-making. Members are chosen via indirect legislative elections, rigorous examinations, or proven virtue metrics (e.g., historical executive approval ratings).

### Problems Addressed

By checking absolute majoritarianism, this hybrid model curbs the core flaws of modern "one person, one vote" systems:

1. Radical individualism and anti-intellectualism.
2. The disenfranchisement of non-voters, such as foreigners and future generations, affected by long-term domestic policies.
3. The majority silencing and abusing minorities.

4. The unrealistic premise that everyday voters have the time or information to act as rational, state-level decision-makers.

## 2. The International Crisis: Taming Globalization

Global integration is fracturing because it has been driven by self-interested nation-states. When leaders of globalization (like the US) find the system no longer serves their strict national interests, they retreat, leaving a volatile power vacuum that rising powers historically fill with conflict.

Conversely, Western attempts at **cosmopolitanism**—the belief that all humans belong to a single community—have stumbled. Aggressive interventions (e.g., in Iraq and Afghanistan) created more misery than they solved, while economic integration (e.g., the EU) triggered domestic inequality and cultural friction.

### The Confucian World Order (*Tianxia*)

Bai introduces a "realistic utopia" rooted in **universal but unequal love**. Drawing from Mencius, Confucian moral psychology holds that human compassion is universal but naturally radiates outward from the family. Therefore, patriotism and prioritizing one's own citizens is justified, but it must never completely disregard the welfare of outsiders.

The resulting *tianxia* (all under heaven) order is a **humaneness-based hierarchy**, contrasting sharply with models like the United Nations where all states are nominally equal:

- **Humane Duties over Sovereignty:** A state's right to absolute sovereignty is contingent upon how humanely it treats its people and the planet.
- **Justified Intervention:** If a state severely mismanages global issues (like exacerbating climate change) or abuses its populace, an alliance of humane states acts as a "world police" to legitimately intervene as a last resort.

## Conclusion: The Key Message

The fundamental solutions to our current political and global crises will not come from doubling down on absolute equality or radical majoritarianism. Instead, the path forward requires **limiting the excesses of democracy with meritocracy** at home, and **tempering the self-interest of nation-states with humane responsibilities** abroad.

## The tyranny of too much democracy: Confucius’s answer

*Democracy today has lost some of its shine, with issues such as the rise of right-wing populist parties worrying some. But part of the problem lies in the conflation of two distinct ideas — liberalism and democracy. If the balance between liberalism and democracy needs to be restored, might a Confucian mixed regime be a possible alternative? Chinese academic Tongdong Bai contemplates the question.*

[https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/confucian-new-tianxia-order-humaneness-restrain-nationalism-and-save-globalisation\\*\\*](https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/confucian-new-tianxia-order-humaneness-restrain-nationalism-and-save-globalisation**)

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*A street performer dressed as the Statue of Liberty in Times Square watches a demonstration against the Iranian government, in Manhattan, New York City, US, on 15 March 2026. (Adam Gray/Reuters)*

The post-Soviet “end of history” euphoria seems to be long gone, and the panic that democracy is in peril has taken hold among many. The recent rise of right-wing populist parties among Western democracies — thought to offer the end of history — is often considered a sign of the decline and fall of democracy. Yet the irony is that many of these parties are rising through

democratic elections. In several countries, they have even won the largest share of votes, only to be kept out of power when coalitions form, all in the name of defending democracy.

Their success, in fact, is not a sign of democracy's collapse but a product of it. If anything, their influence might be even greater if democratic competition were allowed to run its course. The possible confusion that results from this stems from how the term "democracy" is used: it has become a loaded concept that often conflates two distinct ideas — liberalism and democracy.

*... the new threat to liberties was democracy, or the tyranny of the majority.*

### **Fragile balance between liberalism and democracy**

Democracy is about rule by the majority, and liberalism is about the rule of law and the protection of certain liberties. Conceptually, they are different. Historically, proto- and early liberal thinkers sought to protect liberties from oppressive powers. For proto-liberal thinkers such as Montesquieu, the threat was from the rise of absolute monarchy. But in the 19th century, early liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill realised that with absolute monarchy disappearing in the UK, the new threat to liberties was democracy, or the tyranny of the majority. That is, the emergence of liberalism was actually a response to the challenge of democracy — the motivation for Mill to introduce and defend liberalism was to save liberties from the threat of the opinions of the many.



*People walk on Oxford Street in London, Britain, 23 November 2025. (Jaimi Joy/Reuters)*

In this fight, liberalism and democracy achieved a balance — what we call liberal or *constitutional democracy*.

With democracy and its first cousin, equality, advancing continuously, however, this fragile balance is now being broken. What is declining is not democracy, but liberalism. Anything different from the “herd” is considered unequal, elitist, and undemocratic, and “we the people”, left behind in globalisation, wish to disrupt the status quo with the power of the majority, hopefully unchecked by any laws. If this is the case, and if you love liberalism, the only hope, then, is to limit democracy and equality, in order to regain the balance.

But why do we think about regaining the balance? We could simply save liberalism by eliminating democracy completely, and this is doable. After all, in an aristocracy, the few, who are defined by birth, enjoy freedom, and the many labour for them. But if we believe that one’s status should not be defined by pedigree, and that the state exists to serve the well-being of all, we should reject this alternative.

***A crucial difference between Confucians and democrats, however, is that the former do not think that the state should be by the people.***

### **Early Confucians: the elites govern for the people**

Facing a world where the old order that was built on aristocracy collapsed, early Confucians (roughly between 500 BCE and 200 BCE), believed that the state exists to serve the people. For them, the service to the people offers the ultimate legitimacy to the state. That is, the state is for the people. Arguably, they also believe that the state is of the people as well. More importantly, the state should be held accountable for its service to the people. Whether the people are served or not has to be decided by the people, and a government that fails to satisfy its people’s needs should be removed.

A crucial difference between Confucians and democrats, however, is that the former do not think that the state should be by the people. Like democrats, they believe that all human beings have equal potential to govern themselves, and are the best judge of how they feel about their lives. But unlike democrats, Confucians also believe that in reality, only the few can actualise their moral and intellectual potentials to govern for all, and the masses are not competent to make political decisions even for their own benefit.

Thus, Confucians would endorse a mixed regime that combines democratic elements (so that the people can express their satisfaction or the lack of it with the government) with meritocratic elements (so that political decisions that are good for all can be made). One example of this is a bicameral legislature with a democratically elected lower house and a meritocratically selected upper house.

## Elections, examinations, exemplary virtue

In this Confucianism-inspired mixed regime, there are three ways to select members of the upper house. First, the meritocrats of the higher level can be elected by members of the legislature one level lower. Second, we can use the passing of certain exams as the qualification for voters to vote for the upper house, or as the qualification for candidates for the upper house. Third, we can find proxies that indicate the virtue of the candidate. For example, a one-term only position in the upper house on the national level can be given to a two-term governor who has maintained a 40% approval rating during his or her terms, has not been caught with any criminal activities, and is to be retired. All these three ways are not mutually exclusive and can complement each other.

*... the present democratic institution, especially that of one person one vote, has four problems.*



*Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi delivers her policy speech in the parliament, in Tokyo, Japan, on 20 February 2026. (Kim Kyung-Hoon/Reuters)*

This regime should be firmly built on liberal ground, that is, constitutionalism that protects rights and liberties. Constitutionalism is perhaps the real contribution the West has made to humans' search for an ideal regime, and as I have argued in my book, *Against Political Equality*, *Confucians can embrace it*.

For example, for people's voices to be heard and for wise decisions to be made, the right to free speech has to be endorsed. Although traditional Chinese regimes are not full-blown constitutional ones, traditional Chinese thinkers do warn against the oppression of people's voices. In one ancient text, the writer says that to seal the mouth of the people is worse than blocking the river flow (which would lead to a disastrous result).

### **Confucian hybrid regime can restrain excesses of democracy**

Now, why can this constitutionalism-based Confucian hybrid regime restrain the excesses of democracy? To see this, we have to realise that the present democratic institution, especially that of one person one vote, has four problems. 1) It encourages radical individualism and anti-intellectualism. 2) It gives all the political authority to the present voters, although domestic policies, such as environmental policies, can affect non-voters, such as foreigners and future generations. 3) It often encourages the majority to silence the minorities, eroding liberties in a liberal democracy and leading to ethnic cleansing in fledgling democracies. 4) It builds upon an unrealistic premise that voters are rational about their own self-interests, a premise that is considered a myth by many economists and political scientists.

It is unrealistic for two reasons. Almost all modern states are way too large for common people to understand state-level affairs, and the majority of people who are so busy working do not even have time to understand them. By de facto limiting the voice of the people, the Confucian mixed regime may address these problems.

*... the proposal of a Confucian mixed regime is a reminder of a Western tradition that has been lost or neglected, to the detriment of liberal democracy that has been developed in the West...*



*People walk across a street near the Bund in Shanghai, China, on 28 February 2026. (Go Nakamura/Reuters)*

Conflating democracy with liberalism and taking equality as sacred, many democratic thinkers still wish to strengthen democracy and equality in order to solve the problems that are actually created by democracy and too much equality. Montesquieu once argued that democracy would be ruined by the lack of equality and too much equality. Mill suggested that the votes of more informed people should be given extra weight.

The Federalists designed many institutions to check and balance the power of the people, and the American regime at its founding (minus the lack of suffrage and the discrimination against women and minorities) comes closest to the Confucian hybrid regime in reality, although these institutions have been weakened and even eliminated in the progress of democracy and equality.

Therefore, the proposal of a Confucian mixed regime is a reminder of a Western tradition that has been lost or neglected, to the detriment of liberal democracy that has been developed in the West, and the resonance between China and (the neglected) West shows the universality of these ideas.

## Confucian new tianxia order: Humaneness\* to restrain nationalism and save globalization

\* *humaneness: the quality of being kind, tender, and caring towards others. It describes the act of showing empathy and reducing suffering for both people and animals. The word is a noun. It is not the same as just being a human. Being "human" just means you belong to the human race. Being "humane" means you possess the positive, moral traits of a good person.*

*As the world makes radical swings between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, is there a third way — a Confucian world order ruled by a humaneness-based hierarchy? Academic Tongdong Bai ponders the question.*

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*A woman walks past a billboard along a street in Guangzhou, in southern China's Guangdong province, on 14 April 2026. (Jade Gao/AFP)*

Globalisation is in crisis. This should come as no surprise as globalisation has always been led by nation-states. A nation-state, by definition, will do whatever it takes for its own national interest. Globalisation, in contrast, means going beyond nation-states and national interests. Thus

if globalisation is led by nation-states, it can only flourish if the leaders of globalisation find it beneficial to their states' national interests. Once this falls apart, globalisation will be in peril.

### **The fall of globalisation**

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has been the leader of globalisation. When it thought that it was to its benefit, it was happy to offer the service of leadership. In the past decade or more, when the US lost faith in this endeavour, it started rejecting the leadership role, and accusing every other state of taking a free ride from its service and even stealing from it. This sudden change is almost comical, like that of French police chief Captain Renault in the movie [Casablanca](#), who said he was “shocked to find that gambling is going on in here”, only to be handed his winnings.

If the world's largest economy will not maintain the global order, will the second largest, China, do so? The history of the rise of new national powers does not give us confidence. When a nation-state is rising, it will demand more for its own national interest. The rest of the world, also nation-states, obviously do not want to give in. The result, then, is wars, including World War I and World War II.

### **The rise of right-wing populism in the West**

The West, especially “old Europe” or Western Europe, having learned the lesson from these wars, tried to go beyond nation-states by way of cosmopolitanism, or the belief that all humans are citizens in a single community. A more aggressive form of the attempt at cosmopolitanism is guided by the idea that human rights override sovereignty, which has led Western countries to intervene with many human rights violations and even crude oppressions and mass killings.

*To make things right seems to be so demanding on Western countries that oftentimes, they can only pay lip service to the principle that human rights override sovereignty, leading to skepticism and cynicism.*



*Afghan municipality workers clear debris from the site after Pakistani airstrikes hit the Omid Addiction Treatment Hospital in Kabul on 17 March 2026. (Wakil Kohsar/AFP)*

Interventions in the past two decades, such as with Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, however, seem to create new and even more miseries that they are intended to eliminate. To make things right seems to be so demanding on Western countries that oftentimes, they can only pay lip service to the principle that human rights override sovereignty, leading to skepticism and cynicism. A less aggressive form of cosmopolitanism, such as the formation of the European Union (EU) and the creation of a world market, does not seem to be doing too well either. For it leads to serious domestic problems, such as rising economic inequality and political instability that is caused by the failure to assimilate a large group of people with different cultures and religions. All these have led to the rise of right-wing populism in the West.

### **A different model: Confucius's way**

Are we doomed, then, by the radical swing between nationalism and cosmopolitanism? These two alternatives seem to be all we have come up with since modernity, or, should we say, European or Western modernity. But is there another modernity? I say yes.

About 2,000 years before European modernity, China entered a transitional period, from 770 BCE to 221 BCE. Before this transition, the old “world order” — the world known to the Chinese — was built on a hierarchy of nobility, in which noble men of each level ran their fiefdoms with some autonomy, and through the pyramid of nobility, a large empire was divided

into small, close-knit feudal communities, like Europe in the Middle Ages. But this order collapsed, and through wars of all against all, large, populous, well-connected, plebeianised societies of strangers emerged.

*... this sentiment of compassion, though universal, is also very fragile. In order for it to be strong enough to hold strangers together, it needs to be cultivated, and family is a universal and important institution to do so. — Mencius, a Confucian thinker*

There were a few de-facto sovereign states that emerged in the “world”. This transition may be a forerunner of the European transition to modernity. Common to both transitions is the need to answer three key political issues in this new reality: the bond of a large state of strangers, the principles of international relations among independent states, and the selection of the ruling members of the state and even the world. I have illustrated the Confucian answer to the third question, and argued why the mixed regime inspired by Confucianism can still be viable and address the crises of “democracy” well, in the [first instalment](#) published in this journal. In this second instalment, I will focus on how Confucians answer the first two questions and why it is a viable and even better alternative to the nation-state and cosmopolitan models that came out of Western modernity.

### **Familial bonds the primary building blocks**

On the issue of a new social bond, Mencius (372 BCE to 289 BCE), an important Confucian thinker, discovered that all human beings have the sentiment of compassion, a sense of care toward strangers. A famous thought experiment he offered to show this is, if you suddenly see a baby who is about to fall into a well, that is, to be killed, would you feel a sense of alarm and distress? It is a beautifully designed experiment for many reasons. It uses a baby that embodies innocence, rather than an adult who might have done something to deserve to die; it asks for our immediate rather than calculated response (which makes the baby a perfect stranger); and it asks us how we feel, not what we will do.

It is hard to answer no in this hypothetical case. But he also realised that this sentiment of compassion, though universal, is also very fragile. In order for it to be strong enough to hold strangers together, it needs to be cultivated, and family is a universal and important institution to do so. For even an orphan has a family; otherwise, he or she would not survive. We take family as something private, but at the same time, family is the first place for us to transcend our mere self, when, for example, we are asked to save a piece of candy for our baby sister or the best seat for our grandma. This is why familial care is so important to Confucians.



*The elderly and members of the public buying food and eat their meals at the Renshoutang Xianxia Senior Canteen in Shanghai on 6 June 2025. (SPH Media)*

Confucianism would not be the philosophy of Don Corleone in The Godfather movies (“Never go against the family”), as some have criticised. Rather, family is an institution where we learn to care about others by first learning to care about our family members. The Confucian moral psychology assumes that we care about the sufferings of strangers because they remind us of the sufferings of the ones closer to us. The expansion of care is continuous, and one should keep pushing our care outward, until it embraces every human being, living, not yet born, and dead, and also animals, plants, and things in the world. Family is our path to transcendence, and in this transcendence, the world of strangers is united.

*... the Confucian moral ideal is universal but unequal love.*

However, even at the stage of universal care, Confucians think that one still does and should care about the closer ones more than the more distant ones. Just imagine, even if you are this ideal person of universal care, whom would you save first if your daughter and a stranger are drowning? In sum, the Confucian moral ideal is universal but unequal love.

Therefore, by compassion, the whole world can be bonded together, but at the same time, one is justified to care about one’s own state and people more than other states and peoples. Patriotism is thus justified. But while caring about one’s own state first, one should not disregard the interests of other peoples completely because we, as human beings, also care about other

peoples, if we deserve to be called human. For example, if my state and another state are flooded, Confucians would reject the cosmopolitan idea that they should be treated equally, and argue that naturally and justifiably, I should try to save my state first, but I should not do so by directing the flood to a neighbouring state, a practice a defender of nation-state would not object to.

### **Preserving a shared human heritage**

Moreover, all the humane states should form an alliance and play the role of world police that protect the civilised way of life. Being civilised means the preservation of the shared human heritage, such as the classics and historical statues and buildings, and treating peoples humanely (their own people first, and other peoples second). They should never go to war with each other, because being civilised and compassionate, these human and humane states would never fight against another state for material gains, an act of the beast. But if the people of another state suffers greatly from a bad regime, the alliance of civilised states should intervene, including using military forces, although using force has to be used cautiously and only as the last resort.

**The Confucian world order is a humaneness-based hierarchy.**



*This picture taken on 27 April 2026 shows job-seeking labourers and recruiters from clothing factories on a street in an urban village in Guangzhou, in southern China's Guangdong province. (Pedro Pardo/AFP)*

Indeed, Mencius argued that only when a people suffers so greatly as to be ready to welcome the “invaders”, can the liberation be carried out and justified. The Confucian world order is a humaneness-based hierarchy. It is different from the United Nations model where each state is treated equally, or where the five permanent members of the security council are the de-facto dominant forces due to historical contingencies.

The principle beneath this world order is that *humane duties, not human rights, overrides sovereignty*. A state that treats its own people well, but emits a lot of pollution that affects the air over its borders and harming other peoples is not fully humane and thus should not enjoy full sovereignty. This means that other states can legitimately intervene with the environmental policies of this state. If a state doesn't treat its own people well, and even put them in desperate situations, the state loses its sovereignty completely and a liberation by other truly humane states can be justified.

### **Only humaneness can tame the power of the state**

Unlike cosmopolitanism, a radical version of liberalism, according to which everyone should be treated equally (with equal care?) and states should eventually be abolished, Confucians consider the existence of states legitimate, and the Confucian model puts a state's interest above other states. But unlike in the nation-state model, this priority is not absolute, and the legitimacy of a state is limited by how humanely the state treats its own people and other peoples. Confucians would argue that the cosmopolitan model is too good to be true, because it demands too much from human beings, and that the nation-state model is too demeaning to human beings because it treats human beings as self-interest-driven animals only and is also the source of human strives.

***The only hope, then, is to tame the powerful states with humaneness.***

Thus, the Confucian model is more realistic than the cosmopolitan model, and is more idealistic than the nation-state model. It is a “realistic utopia” that strikes a golden mean between the two. Putting it differently, the Confucians realise that only states have power. International organisations cannot really impose their will on states, for a covenant without sword is mere words, as Hobbes would put it. Until there is a united world government that has authority backed up with force, only states can enforce trans-state order. The only hope, then, is to tame the powerful states with humaneness.

How do we get there if this Confucian new tianxia (天下, all under heaven) order is truly desirable? A simple path is for G2, the US and China, to take up the role of a benevolent world police, which does not seem likely now. Still, the EU, ASEAN and other responsible great and middle powers can form alliances and offer public goods to all. I am not optimistic about this path, but it is the only realistic path for global order.

***\*\*ThinkChina is an English language e-magazine with a China focus and powered by Singapore Press Holdings' flagship Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao.***