

Cue the Network: Chinese Soft Authoritarianism versus American Constitutional Pluralism  
(Governance In The Time Of The Technological Singularity, Part III)

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The question that now needs to be addressed is deceptively simple: has rapid and accelerating technological evolution, especially in the information realm and cognitive ecosystem, potentially shifted relative fitness of governance models away from Enlightenment pluralism and towards Confucian soft authoritarianism? Or, put more broadly, is high tech soft authoritarianism the 21<sup>st</sup> century form of 20<sup>th</sup> century pluralism?

Several caveats immediately come to mind. First, traditional concepts of hegemony, involving conventional military and economic power, are rapidly being augmented, if not displaced, by control exercised through soft power and, increasingly, through the manipulation of individuals, communities, tribes, and cultures through weaponized narrative, disinformation warfare, and reflexive control. Future empires will be primarily cultural, psychological, and narrative-based, and not territorial, reinforcing a trend that is apparent today.

Complex hegemony demands more complex governance systems than simply the Westphalian state. Accordingly, a reasonable scenario is that regional civilizational networks rather than state hegemony will characterize the future world order. Although states will not fade away, they are rigid, and prone to over-simplistic ideologies and nationalisms. More agile and adaptive governance structures consisting of dynamic networks of firms, regions, tribes, communities, and states centered around large scale AI/big data/algorithm capabilities, with decentralized control and information functions, will evolve. These networks need not be similar in composition; it might be more likely that different cultural and civilizational governance clusters will feature different dominant entities. The Sahel might be dominated by religious communities while European governance networks might be dominated by traditional states, for example, leading to a sort of global neomedievalism.<sup>1</sup> An important implication of this structure is that Western universalism and its associated values, and the state-based Westphalian world order, will, despite best fantasies of Enlightenment powers and associated NGOs, continue to become contingent and regional.

These somewhat general observations can be sharpened by considering the two states that might ground future governance networks: the U.S. (adaptive pluralism model incorporating Enlightenment values), and China (AI enhanced soft authoritarianism model incorporating Confucian values). Evaluating models in the early stages of foundational change is speculative, of course, and both the

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<sup>1</sup> Such a world order would align with earlier analyses, especially S. P. Huntington's 1996 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster). "Neomedievalism" is defined by S. McFate as "a non-state-centric and multipolar world order characterized by overlapping authorities and allegiances," a form characterized not so much as anarchy, but, in McFate's words, "durable disorder". S. McFate, 2014, *The Modern Mercenary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. xv.

Chinese and American examples are, as would be expected at present, flawed, with a mix of adaptive and regressive characteristics. In particular, both are today reacting to change in traditional ways rather than imagining the needs and demands of future governance, and therefore are failing to grasp opportunities and respond to challenges.

Figure 1 presents an overview of these two models using the nine characteristics identified in my last blog (“Governance In The Time Of The Technological Singularity, Part II: Assessing Governance Models, A Highly Speculative Venture,” <https://blogs.asucollegeoflaw.com/lsi/files/2021/09/ASU-governance-and-singularity-blog-no.-2-2021.pdf>) as important to future governance competence. Obviously, such an overview is broad, subjective, and tentative, but it does suggest certain trends worthy of further investigation.

Future Governance Characteristic	US Current	US Potential	China Current	China Potential
Agile and rapid cycle time	--	-	-	+
Un-siloed governance structure	--	+	-	+
Adaptive	--	- (only positive if firms become integrated with governance)	--	- (positive if Party becomes network integrator rather than controller)
Public input to support regime legitimacy	++	-	-	+
Tribal rather than individual focus	--	--	+	++
Integrating high techn with governance	--	-	-	+
Embracing global multiculturalism and relativism	--	- (US as current hegemon will have hard time shifting to multicultural world)	neutral	++ (China as regional hegemon in already Confucian east Asia)
Cultural flexibility in light of future scenarios	-- (Low cultural energy with significant focus on anti-modern ideologies such as environmentalism)	-- (Moving away from focus on individual values such as privacy might prove impossible)	+ (High cultural energy with focus on community)	++ (Confucian culture supportive of social credit system nudging and data production, couples to AI/big data/analytics)
Narrative effectiveness (including soft power cultural strength)	+ (significant downward trend)	- (rigid legal/constitutional structures)	Neutral (with positive trend)	+ (if can combine increasing exercise of power with less arrogance)
Data effectiveness	+ (with private firms and current AI/big data leadership)	-- (following EU leadership on privacy, etc., ensures less competent state level AI compared to China)	+ (significant new data generation balanced against new privacy regs)	++ (much more potential data generation and access than any competitor, including US)

Figure 1: Strengths and weaknesses of Chinese soft authoritarianism versus American Constitutional pluralism (scale from - - to ++).

Reflecting today’s active and highly competitive relationship between the U.S. and China, current characteristics reflect roughly equal performance on the part of both systems, albeit with different strengths and weaknesses. China, for example, is more comfortable with deep global multiculturalism – that is, a multiculturalism not based explicitly or implicitly on assumed Western universalism in ethics and values, and the Westphalian governance model - while a significant weakness of the U.S. is that, being the dominant purveyor of that world order, it is loath to give it up, or even admit that its time has passed. On the other hand, the U.S. as a pluralistic rather than authoritarian structure clearly

outperforms China currently in terms of public input to governance processes. Both the US and China appear to have robust regime legitimacy at this time, despite obvious challenges to both.

The differences between China and the U.S. become more distinct, however, when trends in technological evolution, especially regarding information and communication technology (ICT) and AI/big data/analytics, are taken into account. Indeed, one result of a confluence of many seemingly disconnected trend lines is that the Chinese model, less structured and thus potentially more agile and adaptive than the American, shows significantly more fitness potential. Both, however, struggle with the fundamental question of how to govern a large country with increasingly fragmented cultures, and a deep desire to return to older governance models, rather than risk the unknown of networked governance that might diminish the relative power of the state, or the Party.

Figure 1 also suggests several relevant differences between China and the US. For example, the rambunctious debates leading to better policy decisions that were a strength of U.S. pluralism have, because of changes in technology and geopolitics, become a serious vulnerability. Another point is that the US is an Enlightenment culture which venerates the individual as a citizen, and the locus of rationality, identity, and regime legitimacy; while China, as a culture heavily influenced by Confucian thought, is far more appreciative of social stability, structure, and community. This difference alone heavily favors China going forward, because advances in behavioral economics, psychology, and neuroscience have made individual identities both design spaces and battlespaces, undercutting the primacy of the individual in favor of tribes defined and manipulated by narrative. These processes have been accelerated by sophisticated information warfare by both foreign geopolitical adversaries and domestic extremist groups.

A third advantage for soft authoritarianism lies in its more rapid decision-making processes. Pluralism, simply put, needs lots of cycle time. Vigorous debate, checks and balances, explicit legal and regulatory processes – all take time. In periods of slow technological and social change, that is a more than acceptable cost for better decision-making under conditions of complexity. But in periods of rapid and unpredictable change, the long and slow processes of pluralism inevitably decouple from the accelerating cycle time of external change, with concomitant decreases in both institutional competence and legitimacy.

It is no doubt true that China has its share of governance issues right now, such as significant weakness in developing and projecting soft power, and a clear tendency to regress to traditional centralized authoritarianism, sidelining the globalizing high technology firms that are critical to future governance. Nonetheless, as an example of the kind of potential that Confucian powers may have that pluralistic powers cannot duplicate, consider the social credit system (SCS).

China's social credit system essentially extends across all activities the idea of financial fitness ranking for lending purposes, familiar to many in the West as the financial credit rating system; when fully operational, it will provide a numerical ranking of the fitness of every citizen. Even now, in many areas in China, the SCS score determines whether citizens can get on trains or planes, what dating sites they are allowed on, whether they can get a loan, whether they can get into college, who their friends are, access to discounts on energy and water bills, and much else.

While the West has generally responded simplistically to the SCS, seeing it as just an authoritarian tool, it is a far more subtle expression of cultural values than that. The SCS in China fits Confucian culture, in

that it supports the duty of superiors to nudge moral performance of those beneath them. It is also necessary for an increasingly complex, urbanized society: since China rejects the Western concept of the explicit “rule of law,” it needs a trust system that can function across a large, complex economy and society – like the SCS. Equally important from a governance perspective, an SCS - if appropriately structured - can overcome the information debit that has always been the Achilles Heel of authoritarianism: it can feed information on grassroots activities to decision-makers, avoiding information gaps (local officials don’t want to tell superiors about problems) and over-simplification (the SCS can map different perspectives to improve decision-making in complex systems). It can also detect undesirable political behavior before it rises to dangerous levels or threatens regime legitimacy. It thus has the potential to mitigate the weaknesses of traditional authoritarian models, while avoiding the weaknesses of pluralistic societies.

Finally, an SCS system not only relies on state level AI/big data/algorithm/surveillance technology, but it generates massive data streams on individual behavior, in turn enabling better modeling and manipulation of citizens. Thus, the SCS can become the basis of a reflexive governance system: the citizen, shaped by reflexive control, feeds the state AI, which in turn manages the citizen to advance the goals of the authoritarian state, again insuring no loss of legitimacy.

In short, in a Confucian society that puts less value on privacy than Europe or the US, where “nudging” can be accepted as part of the reciprocal duties and responsibilities owed by leaders to those underneath them, and where the flexibility of a deep social credit system is appropriately deployed, it seems at least arguable that China could come up with a different model of governance that is far fitter than the pluralistic model.

At this point, however, that is hypothetical. In both China and the U.S., it is very clear that current political elites are retreating to past verities rather than responding to the opportunities and challenges of the future. Both, for example, are clamping down or trying to break up successful high technology companies in a spasm of anti-trust and populist rhetoric. China in particular appears to be rapidly regressing to a more traditional, Party-centric, authoritarianism. In both cases, this might charitably be viewed as the last struggle of the Westphalian state based system against replacement by the dynamic civilization networks mentioned earlier, which necessarily would include high technology companies as potent power nodes. Uncharitably, it is fear, political cowardice, and an extraordinary failure of imagination in the face of a very different future.

With China, then, the big caveat might be whether it settles for a crude technological enhancement of traditional authoritarian surveillance/control, or whether it explores the full power of an adept high-technology soft authoritarianism based on tools such as the SCS. Among the relevant indicators will be whether, and how, it is using the SCS system to generate data which is in turn fed into its state-level AI systems, and whether as SCS technology is exported as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is used to generate similar data from different cultures. Those data are a critical resource in geopolitical conflicts increasingly centered in metaverses and weaponized narrative campaigns, a resource that the West not only won’t have, but is actively limiting (e.g., EU GDPR and similar American initiatives). The path is there; the question is whether China will take it.

America also has options, many involving re-design of federalism to encompass tribalism rather than the individualism inherent in its current structure. One possibility is a deliberate project of radical subsidiarity. Consider, for example, the issue of guns, one issue that feeds into identity politics and

tribalism. Much of the heat around the subject comes from the insistence on one Constitutional standard that is imposed on urban New York and Los Angeles as if it were rural Arizona or Alabama. This makes no sense; it is an artifact of the idea that rights are universal and, implicitly, that they look the same under all conditions. Negotiating radical subsidiarity would be fraught, but the alternative – fragmenting into tribal dysfunction – means the end of the American experiment. Other devices, such as reinstating universal conscription for public service, including military service, have been proposed. A new Federalist Papers activity, intended to reinvent pluralism while supporting as many values as possible, could develop an option space which could then inform radical reform. Current political initiatives, if they can be so characterized, such as reaching back to ancient anti-trust doctrines, indicate that America is far from ready to take the necessary steps to modernize pluralism. As with China, the U.S. has paths forward; the question is more one of imagination and will.

In short, while China may on balance have some significant potential advantages over the U.S. in evolving future governance structures, neither power is yet willing to allow the emergence of the agile and adaptive networks that future governance will require. Both are responding to significant challenge by retreat to a dead past, a futile exercise at best, and one that can only last so long as their adversaries are equally lacking in imagination.

But history teaches that a strategy of hoping your adversary is as incompetent as you are has never been terribly successful.