# Niccolò Machiavelli and the Governance of the People's Republic of China

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***Introduction***

Niccolò Machiavelli's ideas are unsystematic, inconsistent, and at times even contradictory. *The Prince* is the first major work to divorce politics from ethics and lend exclusive autonomy to political philosophy on its own; Machiavelli recognized that leaders are bound by human capacity and in recognition of constraints and limitations, must adopt a realistic vision about power.[1] While some scholars say his ideas provocatively endorse immoralism or at least amoralism—counseling leaders to avoid the common values of justice, mercy, temperance, wisdom, and love for their subjects—others view the Italian philosopher as a realist and pragmatist, suspending common ethics for matters as important as high statecraft, delineating a line between personal morality and political morality. But there is another Machiavelli to be discovered in a less read and more complexly textured work *The Discourses on Livy*—in which Machiavelli sympathizes with a civic, republican regime citing multiple advantages over non-republican regimes in the governance of the state.[2] How should scholars reconcile these two contrasting political philosophies?

Having molded a unique political philosophy that attempts to resolve and reconcile some of these major contradictory tensions that exist between Machiavelli's republican tendencies embodied in *The Discourses* and his more artful recommendations in *The Prince*—Chinese leaders appear to have laid the philosophical architecture for a regime that has brought together the "best of both worlds." This paper illuminates tensions and potential reconciliations in Machiavelli's philosophy using examples from attempts by Chinese leadership to balance Machiavelli's competing advice between three core dichotomies—fear and love, liberty and

[1] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*. Oxford: The Oxford University Press, the translation by Luigi Ricci was first published in 1903; the present revised translation was first published in 1935.

[2] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings, vol. 2 (The Prince, Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius, Thoughts of a Statesman)*. Boston, J. R. Osgood and company, 1882). Vol. 2. Translated by Christian Detmold. E-Book published by the Liberty Fund, Inc.

security, flexibility and continuity. The practical solutions in governance include: 1) ruling the masses through love, but controlling elites through fear—simultaneously and strategically employing Machiavelli's two "main motives" through ferocious populism or what some scholars have termed "Machiavellian democracy"; 2) producing a non-republican form of liberty through deliberately ambiguous ideology and extreme pragmatism grounded in security; and 3) finding the right balance between flexibility and continuity in the process of leadership selection, succession, and promotion.

***Love & Fear***

Machiavelli's most remembered quote offers a controversial take on leadership and statecraft: "it is much safer to be feared than loved" (*The Prince* 80). But when discussed by students and scholars, the preceding context is often left out grossly oversimplifying Machiavelli's true insight: "from this arises the question whether it is better to be loved more than feared, or feared more than loved. The reply is, that one ought to be *both* feared and loved, but as it is difficult for the two to go together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one of the two has to be wanting" (*The Prince* 80). Machiavelli explicitly states that if it were possible, the best outcome would be to maintain power through both love *and* fear, but these two drivers can hardly exist together. Language in *The Discourses* reinforces this seemingly exclusive duality: "men are prompted in their actions by two main motives, namely, love and fear" (*The Discourses* 329).

Machiavelli in *The Discourses* also explains that periodic moments of mass passion that bring the corrupt aristocracy to a popular reckoning can be good for society so long as it does not preclude a state from achieving stability and advancement in its destructive wake. Although he never explicitly uses the word "populism," he argues that the tension in the Roman Republic

between classes—the nobility (patricians) and people (plebeians)—had actually enabled Rome to achieve great things. Rather than destroying Rome—the standard view at the time—tension between the aristocracy and the masses led to conflict and compromise that forced them together for the greater good, turning—in Machiavelli's view—Rome into a model of state endurance.

In a republic, Machiavelli argues this class tension is natural, but in non-republics such as modern China, this dynamic needs to be artificially generated by ruling the masses through love and controlling elites through fear—ultimately adhering to Machiavellian positions drawn from both *The Prince* and *The Discourses*. Ruling the masses through love but controlling direct political, financial, and military elites through fear is a tactic of governance that defies the constraint outlined in *The Prince* and produces a populist tension between elites and the masses as prescribed in *The Discourses* specifically through state-led anti-corruption campaigns. Typically such tensions are easy to execute but difficult to sustain, however, if a leader can engineer such a self-reinforcing mechanism between the masses and the elites, such a populist dynamic can brilliantly achieve the ultimate goal of state stability.

There is perhaps no example more salient than Chinese ruler Xi Jinping's wide-reaching anti-corruption campaign, initiated shortly after coming to power in late 2012. Cracking down on "tigers and flies"—high-level officials and local civil servants alike, Xi's campaign has enjoyed widespread support among ordinary Chinese. No person was safe: even the highest national leaders from all domains of power—the military, business, and politics—previously thought to possess criminal immunity were jailed. Like Borgia who publicly executes his minister, Xi understands well the spectacle of punishing the highest elites as political *virtù*. There is an ancient Chinese idiom which encapsulates this philosophy of using punishment to warn others—"kill the chicken, show the monkey." Machiavelli would endorse such a tactic—killing

the great to gratify the people: "... he had him placed one morning in the public square at Cesena, cut in half, with a piece of wood and blood-stained knife by his side. The ferocity of this spectacle caused the people both satisfaction and amazement" (*The Prince* 42). Such a public act renders the masses content and satisfied because it frames Xi as the individual directly responsible for delivering justice for the iniquities and cruelties that were committed against the people while serving as a powerful reminder for those elites that they could be next—creating the mutually-reinforcing combination of love *and* fear Machiavelli thought difficult to achieve together. By pursuing such a risky campaign so early in his tenure, Xi demonstrated that he is not afraid of producing fear in the power structures he needs to control while inducing the love he requires to rule if he is to be successful in governing as large and complex a country as China.

Why fear for elites and love for the masses? Why not in reverse? Such a dynamic would surely fail if it were to be reversed as Machiavelli would contend that fear leads to hostility and thus "a prince can never insure himself against a hostile populace" (*The Prince* 52). This has the historical precedent in China anyway: Xi didn't invent such a formula, rather he is a product of a political structure that has existed for thousands of years: which, despite its newest communist incarnation, still remains at its core a system of dynastic rule. Fear has always remained the principal motive of choice given that in the Chinese dynastic tradition—when one loses political power, one typically also loses their wealth, their freedom, their life, and possibly their entire extended family. In such a winner-take-all system, the losers are quite literally erased from history. Such severity would align with Machiavelli's contention that "men must either be caressed or else annihilated; they will revenge themselves for small injuries, but cannot do so for great ones; the injury therefore that we do to a man must be such that we need not fear his vengeance" (*The Prince* 22). Historically, fear has been the *only* mechanism through which

Chinese elites have kept order for the sake of their own rule and for the stability of the state, but by demonstrating himself to be a skilled populist, Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign is a valuable case study through which to further examine Machiavelli's teachings on fear and love.

***Liberty and Security***

Across both *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, Machiavelli characterizes regimes based on a hierarchy of ends defined by their means. On one end, he places strong governments that hold in check the aspirations of both nobility and the masses balanced by legal and institutional mechanisms that deliver security (*vivere sicuro*). On the other end of the spectrum, he places fully constitutional regimes in which the ultimate goal of the political order is the "freedom of the community" (*vivere libero*). Machiavelli clearly expresses a distinct preference for republics saying that only republican regimes can achieve true "liberty." He believed that even the best monarchies lack certain characteristics prevalent in republican governments—theoretically making republics the most advanced form of political evolution. Such an absolutist claim is unusual coming from Machiavelli though when juxtaposed with his advice for rulers to remain flexible and ground decisions in the pragmatic rather than relying on inflexible dogma. Using the terms consul and prince interchangeably, Machiavelli in *The Prince* offers advice with universal applicability irrespective of regime type. So how should Machiavelli's inconsistencies on means and ends be understood? Are republics the only regime type capable of delivering so-called true "liberty" to its people?

On these questions, Chinese rulers would contend it has in its political philosophy a resolution for yet another one of Machiavelli's inconsistencies by purposefully remain ideologically ambiguous in practice, casting its actions as communist in theory through the usage of the phrase "with Chinese characteristics" while also leaving indefinite timelines for its

ideological transformation to full communism. As a result, China would argue that it has produced, through this political structure, an alternative form of liberty distinct from "republican liberty."

Chinese ideological ambiguity is rooted in Machiavelli's contention that all theory should be considered with regard to the real situation. Accordingly, Chinese leaders pick and choose elements of different ideologies to govern rather than importing one ideology wholesale. They use capitalism to become wealthy, traditional legalism theory for general rule, socialism to improve people's lives, nationalism to promote unity, and communism for purposes of history and defiant pride. Former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping said "practice is the only standard to test truth" and "no matter if it is a white cat or a black cat, as long as it can catch mice, it is a good cat." Such pragmatism and realist political theory is embodied by Machiavelli in an undated letter to Piero Soderini: "in judging policies we should consider the results that have been achieved through them rather than the means by which they have been executed."[3] Furthermore, China's leaders intentionally leave out a definitive timeline for their transformation to communism. While the constitution states that the party's highest ideal is still the realization of communism—this has been left as an "over-the-horizon" goal. While some might say that China's leaders have no option given Karl Marx never clearly defined how a true communist state order would be maintained, it's more likely that Chinese leaders have adopted Machiavelli's strong sense of political realism in defiance of the fantasy utopian ideals that Plato and others might have espoused.

Machiavelli would support the Chinese notion that security (*vivere sicuro*) is to be prioritized over liberty given the disproportionate demand (*vivere libero*): "but as to the other

[3] Count Carlo Sforza, *The Living Thoughts of Machiavelli*. London: Cassell, 1942, p. 85. Translated by Dr. Arthur Livingston.

popular desire, that of recovering their liberty, the prince, not being able to satisfy that, should examine the causes that make them desire to be free; and he will find that a small part of them wish to be free for the purpose of commanding, whilst the others, who constitute an immense majority, desire liberty so as to be able to live in greater security" (*The Discourses* 120). He believes the vast majority conflate liberty with security anyway, and Chinese leaders would substitute "institutions and laws" with ever-increasing economic improvements: "The [masses], who only care to live in security, are easily satisfied by institutions and laws that confirm at the same time the general security of the people and the power of the prince" (*The Discourses* 120).

Chinese leaders would disagree with Machiavelli that "liberty" or "freedom" is impossible to produce in a non-republican regime arguing that they have successfully eliminated many of the problems which currently plague western republics due to the excesses and dangers of *too much* liberty (*vivere libero*)—narcotics, arms, domestic/foreign terror, COVID-19, and more. Harsh punishments on narcotics trafficking and the disarmament of its people (viewed as infringement of basic rights in Western republics) allow for a freedom from addiction crises or mass shootings. Highly sophisticated systems of surveillance (seen as infringing upon rights to privacy in Western republics) have all but eliminated domestic and foreign terror threats. But most prominently, the ongoing pandemic has upended many of the most basic ideas about freedom as for many months now, 1.4 billion people living in China have *far* greater freedom to live a normal day-to-day life than their counterparts in Western republics. Only through enduring the limitations of security, did true liberty manifest itself. Although Machiavelli said that the masses confuse liberty with security, large-scale crises like the pandemic have increasingly shown the efficacy of non-republics in providing greater security *and* greater freedom without greatly sacrificing one at the expense of the other.

***Flexibility and Continuity***

A final tension between *The Prince* and *The Discourses* concerns Machiavelli's ideas about the method of selection for national leadership. Machiavelli's republican sympathies are on full display when he offers the observation that republics provide flexibility and adaptability in leadership because dynamic events in the external environment require an analogous response, but since it is psychologically impossible for human disposition to change so abruptly with the times, a republic confers the necessary civic institutions through which leaders of different qualities may adapt and rule. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli is unable to name a ruler that exhibits the variable *virtù* that he deems necessary for absolute control of *fortuna*, but rather all of his case studies with Pope Julius II, Emperor Severus, and others form individual, unique case studies of successful rulers whose characteristics suited the times. The same is true in *The Discourses* where Machiavelli articulates the difference in character of Fabius Maximus and Scipio—whose variation in personal qualities fit accordingly with different perspectives on Roman military strategy against Hannibal of Carthage (306).

Thus, Machiavelli's prescriptive recommendation lacks universality and perhaps therefore, practicality. He says: "for if one could change one's nature with time and circumstances, fortune would never change" (*The Prince* 115). Machiavelli states that the realities of human character tend to favor a republic over a principality because the former is better able to adapt itself to diverse circumstances than the latter owing to the "diversity of feeling and interests" found among its citizens (*The Discourses* 37). Thus in juxtaposing republics and non-republics, there seems to be a critical piece missing where Machiavelli says nothing about *how* republican institutions can best identify and authorize the necessary leaders to rule whose qualities match those required at the time. This is where Chinese political

philosophers have produced their own solution—an oligarchy with a strong leader—a balance between an inflexible monarchic regime and the prospect of instability with elections.

At every level of government, Chinese leaders are selected rather than elected. It is unclear whether Machiavelli would have been a proponent of elections, direct or indirect, but the very nature of elections would classify them as *fortuna*—the enemy of political order and the ultimate threat to the safety and security of the state. While populism may enable a leader to stay in power as discussed in the first section regarding love and fear, by directly giving the masses power through direct democracy via an election—populism can quickly bring temporal instability to the state. In practical terms, the Chinese would never trust a single election to elect their top leadership, so instead they select their leaders through careful, methodical, and meticulous deliberations after years of brutal observation, cultivation, and examination. Such a methodology ensures the continuity of rule in contrast to more republican institutions.

This isn't to say that Chinese leaders have a completely meritocratic system—in fact, factions and patronage are known to dominate Chinese elite politics. What China *has* implemented are institutionalized, informal norms for leadership succession which elicit the same variability in disposition across leadership which republican institutions produce. These measures include a "first among equals" principle which introduced the concept of "collective leadership" within the most elite tier, "the grandfather clause" which allows the outgoing ruler to name a preferred leader for two generations later (skipping the next generation) and creating an alternating balance, mandatory retirement ages, term limits, among others.

***Conclusion***

Modern Chinese society gives play to Machiavelli's various incompatibilities while Chinese leaders have experimented to find the right balance—the balance between love and fear,

liberty and security, flexibility and continuity. As described in this paper, Chinese leaders have found unique, innovative ways to combine his seemingly incompatible ideas together. Just last week, top Chinese and American diplomats traded sharp, biting words in Anchorage, Alaska. While clashes over the many deep-seated issues might be easy to attribute to the natural tension that occurs when a rising power challenges an existing power, deep differences in political philosophy between the elites in Beijing and Washington serve as a useful point of entry to ask more probing questions about the true nature of Machiavelli's teachings which couldn't be more relevant today.