

Anthony Comegna ([00:19](#)):

(silence). Welcome back everybody and thanks for joining me again here on Ideas in Progress. I'm your host, Anthony Comegna, and I'm completely delighted to offer you all part two of my recent interview with historian Steve Davies.

Anthony Comegna ([00:32](#)):

Way back almost two years ago now, almost right after I started here at IHS, I started planning around discussion-based programs co-sponsored with Liberty Fund that we call our Advanced Topic Series. We've covered a few of these very early in the show. We featured Brad [Bursar 00:00:47], David Bedo, and [Tani Florine 00:00:49]. But 2020 put a serious roadblock into our advanced topics schedule. Well, now that it's finally time to have those discussions, I could not be more excited, especially for the first one. Our topic is Liberty and the Struggle for the Early Chinese State. And I could not be more excited for it. As we record here, it's happening this next weekend. But I certainly couldn't keep all this amazing content to myself.

Anthony Comegna ([01:15](#)):

So it helped me share it with you all, here's Steve Davies, on Chinese history, Confucianism, legalism, a little bit of Daoism and a lot of world history to help disrupt our generally Western centric view of liberalism. All right, Steve welcome back. And let's switch gears here from talking about IHS' 60th anniversary and related topics, to the topic of our upcoming discussion colloquial co-sponsored with Liberty Fund. This is one of our advanced topics series on Liberty and the Struggle for the Early Chinese State. Something very close to my heart, especially because as listeners know, I've been doing a series on the world history of liberalism. I love world history and I wish we did more of it, generally speaking. So I was really excited to do this topic this year. And I was definitely excited that you signed on to lead the discussion for us.

Anthony Comegna ([02:14](#)):

And one of the things I know about you because I'm of course an inveterate listener of Kayla Brown's Cato Daily Podcast. And he always likes to mention whenever you come up, your reflections on Sung China. So maybe you could use that as an entryway to tell us what is your background exactly in studying Chinese history? And maybe tell us a little bit about why you have focused in some of your other public lectures on Sung China in particular.

Stephen Davies ([02:46](#)):

Well, [inaudible 00:02:49] I'm very much an armature in this area. For a long time, like I think most historians, I had an extremely Eurocentric perspective and I knew little if anything about China other than very recent Chinese history. But then a few years ago, I started doing research on the book I brought out finally a year ago about the transition to modernity. And in the course of doing research for that, I read quite a number of books including called ReORIENT by Andre Gunder, the light Andre Gunder Frank. And in this book, Frank talks a lot about the history of East Asia, China in particular and various aspects of it's economic and social history, and the way in which a lot of these things are commonly thought as being somehow distinctively western, had actually always been around for a long time anyway, in China. And so this got me very, very interested. I then dive into Chinese history. And at that point I was sold on this fascinating world of history, and I'm still constantly reading about and learning about it.

Stephen Davies ([03:56](#)):

And, I will add [inaudible 00:03:58] plugin for a book here. I just recently read a fantastic science fiction trilogy. It's usually called The Three-Body Problem. Although that's actually the title of the first book and that is easily the best science fiction novel I've read in many years, and it makes great use of Chinese history. So, my interest in things Chinese is very much an ongoing thing. Why the Song? Well, because the Song are a distinctive Chinese dynasty in a way. They are a period in Chinese history, when China is easily the most dynamic, innovative society on the planet. And it's under the Song, that China comes very, very close to a breakthrough in modernity way back in the 13th century, which if hadn't happened, would mean that we now would be living in a world that has been more than four, six or 700 years, rather than just over 200. We'd be staggeringly rich and technologically advanced.

Stephen Davies ([05:05](#)):

So it's one of the great tragedies that this was aborted. But if you look at Song China, the economy of Song China and the society of Song China, is comparable in terms of the lifestyle you're talking about and the intellectual development, but above all, the technological and economic development is comparable to late 18th century Europe, bringing very early 19th century Europe. The Chinese have a whole range of technologies at that time, that would not even be thought of, wouldn't even be a twinkle in somebody's eye, outside China until several hundred years later. They have for example, an enormous merchant fleet, almost entirely private owned, composed of seagoing junks, which were up to 300 feet long, which had crews of up to 1000, which sailed all over the East and South China sea, into the Bay of Bengal over to India.

Stephen Davies ([05:59](#)):

And this morning, if you go to Guangdong province, and what used to be called Cang Tong, is I unthinkably, [inaudible 00:06:08] number one museum, which is an enormous museum. It's a gigantic glass box in which they preserved a nearly 200 foot long junk that they fished off from the seabed. And this junk was carrying several 10s of 1000 of pieces of porcelain plus thousands of its iron, where, and miles of silk on a train voyage to Java. But it was only one of literally thousands of ships that were sailing out of Chinese ports. So this time all over the Eastern and Southern parts of Asia.

Stephen Davies ([06:42](#)):

And, there were also other ways in which China at this time, as I say, staggeringly advanced compared to the rest of the world and extraordinarily dynamic and inventive in all ways. And all of this sadly came to an end. And so it's a fascinating case study of both how we could have had a breakthrough into eternity before it actually happened, and also how that dynamism can be quite deliberately rolled back and reversed as it was by the subsequent Chinese dynasty, the intuitional Mongol rule following the Congress to China at the end of the 13th century.

Anthony Comegna ([07:22](#)):

Yeah. From college, the thing that stands out the most to me about the Sung dynasty is that famous silk scroll, I believe of the Kaifeng bridge where it's like medieval, London bridge or something, but to the max. It's so huge, and it's just lined with restaurants and shops and wagon traders and all sorts of stuff, and people milling about their business. And it's just a gigantic mess of commerce in this medieval Chinese city. It looks strikingly modern.

Stephen Davies ([07:58](#)):

Yeah, very much so. And, the whole... Patricia Ambry, one of the greatest living Sinologist has done research on the incredible array of civil society organizations that you find in Southern China. There is clubs devoted to almost anything you care to imagine from goldfish fantasy, into sports of various kinds, to literature discussions, to dining clubs, any thing you care to mention. And that diversity and wealth of civil society in Song, trying to reflect most other things, the hands-off policy on the Song emperors, because what they had done very unusually for Chinese dynasties was not to try and control or regulate the lives of their subjects to a great degree. They'd taken a much more hands off policy, and they'd also scraped and huge amount of the internal controls, economic and other controls that previous industries like the Tang and had in place.

Stephen Davies ([09:00](#)):

And this is what also led to the explosion of dynamism under the Song. Now, it's an interesting question actually, which relates, I think some questions you're probably going to pose to me as to whether this was ideologically motivated or purely a pragmatic response to challenges. And I think the answer is that initially it was a setup, because I think the earliest two Song emperors, Song Taizu and Song Taizong, they embarked on this policy for purely pragmatic reasons. It was a way of raising more revenue basically, then because they wanted to switch the tax burden, the tax financing of the Chinese state away from taxes on land and agriculture paid in kind to money taxes, levied on trade. And so they wanted to encourage trade and call us to do this. But increasingly it was ideological because what you get under the Song is the development of simple neo-Confucianism, which is actually the form of Confusionism that we're familiar with today.

Stephen Davies ([10:00](#)):

If you actually read contemporary Confucian arguments that basically Song Chinese Confucianism updated. And so what you get from people like Tusi, and for example, the great Chinese philosopher [Lactao 00:10:14] is a version of Confucianism, which goes on to encourage the policy that the Song are promoting. So it starts off perhaps as a programmatic response to concrete needs, but this policy of deliberately encouraging innovation, dynamism, leaving people to their own devices, increasingly has an ideological basis, which is reflected in the debates that take place in Song China at the time, within the council of ministers, which is both an executive body, but also an advisory plenary body, headed by a prime minister. The emperor is more like a supervising figurehead or presiding officers. It's the prime minister and the minister who actually run the show.

Anthony Comegna ([11:01](#)):

So, it strikes me we're going to be moving backward in time progressively probably as we go through the interview here, because my first encounter with Chinese history was actually probably this series of PlayStation games called Dynasty Warriors, which centers around the three kingdoms period. And it's the storyline of the famous series of novels, Romance of the Three Kingdoms. And I eventually read that in high school too, or in college, but, that was my introduction to Chinese history. And as I studied it in a serious way in school, I found the most interesting thing to me was that the big bursts of creativity and cultural production in Chinese history were always there most decentralized moments of political life.

Anthony Comegna ([11:52](#)):

So whenever the emperor was cracked apart and split into many different kingdoms or even warlord factions, that's when you get the rise of great thinkers, often like somebody like Confucius, who is trying to put that back together based on principles from the successful rulers of the past. But I wonder if you

can maybe comment, take us into our list of readings for the upcoming discussion colloquium with that idea about decentralization in Chinese history by the huge flow of ideas that tend to come from those periods of political disintegration.

Stephen Davies ([12:30](#)):

Yes. Well, of course, in many ways you could say that Chinese history for which we have accurate sources begins in one such period, which is the so-called warring States era, following the collapse of the Chao dynasty, about which we actually know, not very much of an archeological evidence. And the division of the was then China, which is the Valley of the Yellow River, the [inaudible 00:12:57] into about a dozen or more competing kingdoms, which are constantly jockeying and fighting for position. It's a bit like Renaissance Italy or some other comparable [inaudible 00:13:10] history, Japan during Sengoku period, for example, and this is the world in which us lips and what Confucius is struck by is the disorder that he sees around him and the failure of good governance. And so basically, he's trying to construct a theory or account, which we find in one of the readings for our sessions, the one, the Analytics, which is a collection of [inaudible 00:13:35] from Barclays quotations, from Confucius book Down Lights, which encapsulate the principles people reported for both good personal life and personal self-development a key concept for Confucianism and good governments.

Stephen Davies ([13:56](#)):

And these ideas then developed by, in other words, we look at Mencius, who's officially known as the second Sage, meaning the second greatest Sage after Confucius himself, which are rather more elaborative theories about politics and governance, in particular, a very splendid and entertaining account of his having a conversation with the King in which he explains why if the King misbehaves he's no longer the rightful sovereign and can be overthrown and rebelled. And then [inaudible 00:14:24] and the King stopped talking. It's an interesting comment.

Stephen Davies ([14:30](#)):

But of course the context of the reading we have is that there was a different response to the disorder and the fragmentation, and also the dynamism of Chinese society at that time, that warring States era. This by the way, is what is known as the hundred schools era that the a hundred schools of faults that were contending. Lots and lots of different philosophies around that, not just Confucius, the motorists, the terrorists, and the other school that we look at in these readings, the legalist. And the legalist, if you like are [Machiavellian of old Electra or Uber Hubsius 00:15:04 ]. They're a rather dark vision of human nature. And they believe that the prime need is indeed all that they agree with Confucius about that, but they have an extremely different idea about how order is to be achieved. And they succeeded in persuading. The rulers of one of the weaker and more marginal stakes, the stage of Chin. Chin is then able to go and conquer and unite all of what is then China into one state and the ruler [Chinchy Hong Chi 00:15:42].

Stephen Davies ([15:43](#)):

It becomes the first emperor. That's what the name actually means. It means first emperor of Chin. And he is, of course, the emperor who's Jade warriors are being regularly carted around the world for various exhibitions from is great. It was great to which was uncovered fairly recently. A total psychopath, by the way. An absolute megalomaniac [inaudible 00:16:04]. He's fortunately for the Chinese, he lived in an era with low rate technology, or we would have killed as many people's stalling, if you'd have the chance. I'm quite confident about that.

Stephen Davies ([16:13](#)):

And it's worth saying that [inaudible 00:16:14] was a great admirer of Chinchy Hong Chi, the tiger of Chin and actually sort angulating, but with the benefits, if you want to call it that of technology. And so, legalism is the thoughts of [inaudible 00:16:30] like of the Chin state. Now, the Chin state does not survive and it's then replaced by the [Zhou 00:16:36]. And what we then see is the debate that takes place within Zhou, China, the first long lasting dynasty of Chinese civilization between on the one hand legalist, or sometimes crypto legalist, and on the other hand Confucius. And this is the debate which continues and recurs throughout Chinese history. So you would say that in many ways, Chinese history in terms of the politics of China is a dialogue between a Confucian tradition, which emphasizes the government that is limited in some ways, but also governed by a set of ethical principles.

Stephen Davies ([17:20](#)):

And on the other hand, legalism, which is a power based theory of government that emphasizes abstract forms of government [far 00:17:29] as it's called, and this is a dialogue that's been going on in Chinese history ever since the second century BC really. And certainly since the Zhou era, which is what the final readings that we have in the reading we look at, and it continues to this day.

Anthony Comegna ([17:45](#)):

If I recall correctly, the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, he died... He was obsessed with finding the elixir of life. The time-tested alchemists project of finding the elixir of life. And I believe he poisoned himself, essentially trying to drink one version of it. You can correct me if I'm wrong on that, but I suppose if he had his way, he would still be around, still rolling as the first and only emperor of China.

Stephen Davies ([18:16](#)):

China. Yes. A truly terrible man. By the way, he also had a network palaces connected by secret underground tunnels. He would go to bed in wall and then sneak away to another one because like most Dassault's, he was terrified that people wanted to kill him, which was almost certainly true. But the international is like the paranoia of the totalitarian Desault. He's another example of that as well.

Anthony Comegna ([18:44](#)):

Yeah. And there's a good reason that dynasty only lasted like 22 years or something like that. But essentially, his lifetime then all fell apart because everybody hated him. But, this is something I've mentioned on the show a few times, and maybe you could use your reflections on this, to talk about the liberal aspects of Confucian thought a little more, especially as it shows up in one of our big documents, the Discourses on Salt and Iron. I've had the sense for awhile that essentially libertarians, radical, classical liberals, whatever you want to call them, have always been around everywhere all the time. And in the conception of Marie Ralph Bard for example, the question is, do you hate the state? And I've always thought to myself at least for a while now, and I've mentioned a few times on the show, I got to think ancient Chinese peasants hated the emperor, at least a lot of them.

Anthony Comegna ([19:40](#)):

Surely, there were plenty of people who didn't buy into the official state ideology and really just hated him for stealing their kids and sending them off, to fight another war Lord and constantly stealing their food and inducing famines, and jacking up the prices on necessities of life like salt. So talk to us a little bit about, where does liberalism in our modern conception of it? Where does it pop up and peek

through in ancient China? Like this is... Especially leading up into the Zhou period and the Discourses on Salt and Iron.

Stephen Davies ([20:18](#)):

Salt and Iron. Yes. Well, I agree with you. And in this sense, I think that Liberalism, if you're like with a capital L does not appear until the 1820s, but throughout the whole of human history before then, there have been what we might recognize looking back at them as proto-liberal movements. Thinkers movements that emphasize individual autonomy, individual Liberty, self-governance and self-direction and human flourishing. Massimo Salvadori, in his book, Liberal Heresy has a very good coach survey at this. And the point Salvadori makes is that this is a heresy [inaudible 00:20:57] most of human history. Now in China, yes, there is always this. There is always, you might say mass, sometimes covert, sometimes violent, popular resistance to the exactions of the Imperial government in Changan or Beijing or wherever it house managing or whatever it happens to be located at the time. But the thing about Confucianism is that... I think Confucianism, it's often described as being conservative, but it's actually quite difficult fit into a Western political thinking because it has certain elements in it, which are not normally found in contemporary or modern Western ways of thinking about the world.

Stephen Davies ([21:38](#)):

So, it's a vision of the world, which says that you... It's not [inaudible 00:21:43]. Do you have to have government? Confucianism is very, very clear about this. You need to have governance because left to itself, there will be disorder. Now, Confucians believe... And Mencius is particularly eloquent on this. That human nature is naturally good. Mencius has a very powerful and famous passage where he describes how you would feel if you see a child that you don't know falling down a well. And he says, "How would you feel?" And he says, "Would you feel a lot distress?" Why would you feel distressed? Well, because you haven't got a natural human sympathy with the child and with his parents. And he argues that there are a certain number of emotions, human beings feel which lead on to sociability and human virtue. And these are natural. But, and this is a big but. They need to be developed.

Stephen Davies ([22:33](#)):

In other words, left to themselves, they will not develop properly. So in the absence of certain activity, you will not have the full development of human capacity or virtue. Now, how do you do this? And the answer is, it's done from the Confucian tradition is that it's done by the person themselves through a process that combines introspection with study of the outside world. The study of things near, at hand, as it's called. And what is, some of it is called the purification of the hearts and mind. So it's a case of internal self-education and development of human qualities of character and personal responsibility, based upon forming certain moral rules and behaving in certain ways towards other people, particularly your parents, filial piety is a huge thing, but also friends, neighbors, and others. And the critical Confucian thought that what then follows from missing Confucian thinking is two key insights if you will.

Stephen Davies ([23:37](#)):

One is that, this reform is development into the self. The achievement of being the superior man, as it's called opposed to the petty man, cannot be done from outside. It has to come crucially from inside. But the other side of this, which is where the need for government comes in is that, you need to have a ruler. A ruler who himself embodies these virtues. Partly because people will then seek to emulate him. And this will then leads to the process of a society becoming reformed. So the idea is that you need a system of both rules and laws and morally exemplary rulers who follow the moral principles of the

Confucian ethical code, but also at the same time, a civil society in which people voluntarily behave and interact with each other in ways that will promote and encourage virtue. And what this means is that the ideal government is one that is conducted according to moral norms and rules, which is governed by laws.

Stephen Davies ([24:40](#)):

But which is also relatively limited. It's hands-off. It will only tax the people as much as is needed for the bare necessities of governance. It will not take more from them in taxation or put burdens upon them, which will actually make it more difficult for them to live a virtuous life in one way or another. So that is Confucianism. So, it advocates definitely a government. So the governor, which always has a very important social role, but it's a role that doesn't involve actually doing a lot of things or spending a lot of money. So they're not [inaudible 00:25:14] like the [talist 00:25:14], but on the other hand, they're not like the legalist because the legalist view by contrast is that human nature is naturally bad. Human beings are naturally Calendly, treacherous, lazy, and just generally no good. And the bottom there for is, if you leave them to their own devices, you're just going to go to hell in a hand basket.

Stephen Davies ([25:36](#)):

And also in particular, a state which leads people to its own devices, the legalist like Lord Shang. Shang yang, or Shannon [BlueKai 00:25:45], they think that he's going to be overthrown and destroyed by his neighbors. So the goal of politics is to promote the power of the state political unit, because otherwise you're going to be conquered by the barbarians essentially. And what this means is that because human beings are naturally, self-interested, self-willed, not public-spirited and not virtuous, but quite contrary, you require rules and laws. And what you require is what they call [far 00:26:13], which means clear and precise modes of bureaucratic governance, basically, in which words, refer to definite known objects, which is also a concern of Confucianism by the way, but also in which you have clearly known rules, which are being forced in a very rigid ruthless way. So it's a classic theory of bureaucratic governance, and it's legalist thinking, which inspires what is perhaps the most distinctive feature of Chinese civilization, which is the government of China by a bureaucratic ruling class recruited by competitive examinations.

Stephen Davies ([26:57](#)):

But paradoxically, the examinations that these bureaucrats have to set, are all about studying the Confucian classics and showing that you understand Confucianism. So you have this strange combination of a structure based upon legalist principles, which are all about power and the necessity for power and playing a transparent, but rigid bureaucratic governance to create order in society and power for the state, but staffed by people who are imbued with Confucian ethics and the Confucian view of what it takes to develop fully, morally rounded superior people. And then that is your constant tension both at the level of policy and in terms of how different figures in Chinese politics are evaluated.

Anthony Comegna ([27:47](#)):

Thank you all so much for joining us again this week. I always like taking a step back from new books and current events to just focus on some of the academic conversations going on in rooms full of IHS folks, whether they're virtual rooms or physical rooms, either way, they're always amazing discussions and I'd hate to hoard them all to myself. Besides, this just fits so well with my recent discussion with Paul [Meany 00:28:11], about Mencius. Our podcasts with Jean Hoffman last fall about world history and liberalism.

Anthony Comegna ([28:17](#)):

And really, I just think we should all know a lot more about Chinese history. Far and away, the most striking thing to me in the readings was just how plainly evil the legalist were. But if we forget the importance of liberalism in this critical part of the world, we risk letting the legalist take over our view of Chinese history as a whole. So my greatest thanks to Steve Davies for taking lots of time out of his busy schedule this month and spending so much of it with IHS and my thanks too, for helping us de stratify Chinese history, world history, and let's hope our future. (silence).