



Hegel and China: Beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre’s “After Virtue and Michael Sandel’s Liberalism” and the “Limits of Justice in the early 1980s”, the debate between communitarians and liberals began to influence political philosophy in Anglo-American academia. The debate centers on the socio-political nature of the self, traditions, community values, and the role of context in shaping our moral and political reasoning. Communitarians emphasize the priority of community, while liberals prefer the significance of individual rights and freedoms. This paper argues that although both sides of the debate are partially correct, taken alone, their positions are incomplete. What is needed is a higher-order theory that can unite them and preserve their partial truths without repeating their errors. With proper readings, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s political and social philosophy accomplishes that by providing a coherent systematic political theory that harmonises the claims of the individual and the community, freedom and context, part and whole, universal and particular, and subjectivity and objectivity. More importantly, this paper also demonstrates the capacity of Hegel’s political philosophy to provide insights for modern China.

Keywords Hegel · Rawls · Communitarian-liberal debate · Organic theory of the state · China

1 Introduction

The debate between communitarians and liberals began in Anglo-American academia with the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* and Michael Sandel’s *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* in the early 1980s, each of which provided a partial response to John Rawls’s masterpiece *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971).

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The debate centers on the sociopolitical nature of the self, whether the community is valuable, and how tradition and social context shape our moral and political reasoning. Communitarians emphasize the priority of community, while liberals favor the significance of individual rights and freedoms in their philosophical intuitions, aims, and reasonings (Bell 2022).

I argue that although both sides of the debate are partially correct, when taken alone, their positions are incomplete and inadequate. What is needed is a higher-order theory that can unite them and preserve their partial truths without repeating their errors. Hegel's political and social philosophy accomplishes this by providing a coherent systematic political theory that harmonises the claims of the individual and the community, freedom and context, part and whole, universal and particular, and subjectivity and objectivity. Hegel's teaching can become a good resource as a third alternative that goes beyond liberalism and communitarianism to help us understand our social and political world and to guide our practices in this world. His theory is especially useful in countries like China, a nation that, for many centuries, has actively sought to reconcile individual and community needs at all levels of society, and whose search has been complicated by her push towards modernization.

1.1 The Liberal-Communitarian Debate: Problems of Liberalism

In his masterpiece, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1971) seeks to provide a theory of justice for a liberal society. He describes a society wherein free citizens are assigned with equal basic rights and cooperate within an egalitarian economic framework. He attempts to replace the widespread utilitarian rationales for democratic societies with more Kantian principles, such as impartiality, universalizability, and respect for persons (Wenar 2017). Some of Rawls's so-called communitarian critics, like Sandel (1982), Walzer (1983), MacIntyre (1981), and Taylor (1979), disputed his liberal notion that securing and fairly distributing the rights and economic resources individuals needed in order for them to live in a free manner is the central task of government. It should be noted, however, that different communitarian philosophers have different approaches and emphases in their criticisms of liberalism, especially Rawls's liberal theory.¹ It is not all liberals but specifically deontological and atomistic or individualist liberals who are the main target of the communitarian criticism. These criticisms evoked replies from pro-liberals, including Dworkin (1985), Kymlicka (1989), and Habermas (1999). The debate between liberals and

¹ However, it is not clear whether the so-called communitarian criticisms of Rawls were accurate and fair, and it is less clear whether Rawls's political theory can adequately represent the kind of liberalism that received criticisms. Schwarzenbach (1991), for example, famously points out that Rawls is closer to Hegel — who was claimed by many communitarians to inspire their own political theories — than many communitarians and liberals seem to assume and we can legitimately apply the term "Hegelian" to many important perspectives of Rawls's liberalism. Rawls does retain some of strands and flavors of Hegel's metaphysics in a more practical, as opposed to metaphysical, form. Gledhill (2020) and Bercuson (2013) also illustrate that Rawls was affected significantly by German idealism and especially by the idealist approach of Hegel and that there is a "Hegelian heritage" in *Justice as Fairness*.

communitarians has continued to be influential in contemporary political philosophy over the past two decades.

The phrasing of “liberal-communitarian debate,” however, is far from perfect. Schwarzenbach (1991) correctly suggests that a simplistic dichotomy between “liberalism” and “communitarianism” is misleading. Taylor (2005) in his *Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate* contributes to the liberal-communitarian debate by brilliantly distinguishing the ontological questions and advocacy issues. Utilizing a 2×2 matrix, Taylor shows that liberals and communitarians also have many cross-purposes. We need to figure out the relations and connections among these categories (atomists and holists, or individualist and collectivist, for example) in order to better appreciate the debate (Hung 2022). Taylor’s proposal is valuable, but our interpretation of the debate would be more fruitful if we could faithfully employ his categories. However, I would argue, that even though he is correct that the portmanteau labels “communitarians” and “liberals” should be discarded so that we could have a more nuanced understanding of the debate, and that neither label could perfectly represent the philosophical positions of a thinker, we still need these two general terms to capture, though vaguely, the abstract contrasts and relations between the two different sides. Although it is unsatisfactory to simply ascribe terms such as “community” and “collectivist” to communitarianism, doing so can allow for a better understanding of the different ethos of each side. Different strands of liberals and communitarians exist, but there are also, I believe, certain patterns that characterize the pairs of the ontological and advocacy categories that help us better appreciate the most outstanding features of each camp in the debate. Therefore, I will nevertheless use these broad terms in this essay to honor the debate as a historical event and to facilitate readers in orienting themselves in the general flavor of the debate, while also encouraging readers to consider other ways of capturing the similarities and differences between the two camps.

The critics of the liberal theory do not call themselves communitarians or offer a single grand, systematic theoretical alternative to liberal political and social theory. Nonetheless, they share a major tendency in their arguments to criticize the liberal devaluation of the value of the community (Bell 2022). At least three such core arguments must be considered by any adequate social and political theory, especially a liberal one.

First, communitarians correctly emphasize the importance of humans living in communities. Liberals do not deny this fact, but they do not always acknowledge its significance. That humans are communal creatures is not merely an empirical generalization or simple fact. Rather, it is a normative proposition that any philosophical theorization should treat seriously and systematically. When Aristotle claims that “man is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle 1941, *Politics* I, 1129) he means not only that humans do habitually and empirically live together, but that it is good for them to do so. It is only in the context of social and political life that they can fulfil their nature. Communitarians such as Sandel (1982) and (Taylor 1985, 2000) argued that Rawls’s liberalism rests problematically on an excessive, individualistic notion of the self. They believed that Rawls neglects the fact that humans/people are likely to be constituted by many communal attachments, including family ties and religious belonging, which are so dear to us that they can only be abandoned or

ignored at a very high cost, if at all. This criticism of liberal views led to the insight that securing the conditions necessary for individuals to choose freely should not and cannot be the sole concern of politics. What is also dearly needed is a method or vehicle capable of sustaining and promoting the social attachments that are vital to our sense of well-being and respect (Bell 2022).

Second, communitarians correctly highlight the undesirable consequences of a certain type of atomistic individualism. Second-wave communitarians, including Etzioni (1993) and Galston (1991), emphasize a sense of social responsibility and try to spread policies that curb the erosion of communal life in societies that are increasingly fragmented. They worry about how modern liberalism may lead to negative psychological and social effects. No matter how sound the liberal principles may be, these authors agree with one another that traditional liberal principles and practices have for sure contributed to modern pathologies such as “alienation from the political process, unbridled greed, loneliness, urban crime, and high divorce rates” (Bell 2022). They see community values and structures neglected in the name of individual interest. The negative consequences of liberal individualism are even worse internationally. When states and other actors adopt the moral perspective of selfish individuals, they neglect the “international community” and its moral obligations (Morris 2000, 235; Boer 2023a, b).

Third, communitarians rightly alert us to the possible mistake of assuming that the values of one community are necessarily those of all communities. They endeavored to uncover the manner in which assertions rooted in liberalism masquerade as universally applicable principles. They targeted Rawls’s depiction of the original position, which he considered to be an “Archimedean point” from which one can appraise the social system’s structure (Rawls 1971, 514). Communitarians replied that the principles of justice should be found in the traditions of particular societies and are thus sensitive to contextual variations.² By defending the moral integrity of communities, communitarianism guards against the imperialism of one particular culture over others. The search for a universal set of values, applicable to all individuals, is a laudable aim, but it is vitiated if the limited moral outlook of one particular culture is imposed on others (Morris 2000, 236). As Bell suggests, liberals who seek a theory of justice by abstracting from concrete, particular, sociopolitical contexts are nevertheless doomed to be philosophically incoherent, while those who use this approach to spread justice in real life are doomed to political irrelevance (Bell 2022).

1.2 The Liberal-Communitarian Debate: Problems of Communitarianism

Communitarianism succeeds in highlighting some of liberalism’s weaknesses. However, when criticizing its excessive atomistic individualism, communitarianism goes to the other extreme by overemphasizing the role of community. Communitarianism holds that individuals are in some way constituted by the communities in which

² See Taylor (1985, ch. 1); MacIntyre (1978, chs.18–22 and 1988, ch.1); Walzer (1983, 8).

they exist. It is not clear, however, what this claim entails. I wonder to what extent individuals are fully constituted or only partially shaped by their communities and other social contexts. Moreover, communitarianism tends to stress differences rather than similarities, sanctioning privilege for those who are included in a community and disadvantage for those who are not. Walzer, for instance, supports restraining the flow of immigrants (Walzer 1983, 31). Immigration control seems to be premised on the assumption that individuals have only civic rights, not natural rights, and that these rights are enjoyed only by the members of the society that grants them. It denies the human right to free passage.

Communitarianism also tends to suffer from moral relativism when it claims that morality is relative to a given community and denies that there can be universal morality. Dworkin, a liberal, correctly notes, for instance, that relativism is inherent in Walzer's communitarianism, and he criticizes it for distorting proper moral comparison and judgment (Dworkin 1985, 219-220). Internationally, if all values are relative to communities, and if in international relations the significant communities are states, then there can be no moral principles which transcend state boundaries, hence no objective justification for foreign policy and no universal standard for judging it. The relativist tendency of communitarianism thus, to a certain degree, threatens both domestic and international politics.

Liberals are thus correct when they argue that the very notion of community, as well as the specific emphasis on it by communitarian theory, threatens individual rights and liberties. Rawls, for example, rejects conflating a political society to a community because of its potential tendency to jeopardize basic liberties (Rawls 1993, 146) and it is dangerous for a political society to view itself as a unified community affirming one single comprehensive doctrine, as it would lead to state oppression (Rawls 1993, 147).

Rawls is right that communitarianism's one-sided emphasis on the socially embedded or encumbered self threatens the notion of individual rights and liberties. Communitarianism tends to deny natural rights and assert that individuals enjoy only the civil rights granted to them by their communities. Not every political community recognizes what liberals consider basic rights and liberties, however; some communities offer their citizens few, if any, rights. Communitarian theory leaves members of such communities vulnerable and helpless (Morrice 2000, 242). A social and political theory that puts too much weight on the community rather than on individual liberty and universal values may result in an overly fragile system of rights or potential violations of individual rights and liberties. The universality of basic rights seems to be a prerequisite for a just communitarianism.

The other pragmatic concern is that communitarianism is not a plausible alternative to liberalism in interpreting and guiding our social and political world. Communitarianism is not a coherent and systematic social and political theory. It presents itself mainly as a reaction to or criticism of liberalism. Although all the philosophers who are called communitarians share a common emphasis on community and an attack on individualism, they do not have a particular shared philosophical and political proposal, as liberals do. They criticize liberalism from various perspectives, but their proposed alternatives do not offer viable, comprehensive guidance for our social and political life. For instance, communitarians tend to remain vague

about the nature, shape, and extent of the community. Is the community the family, the workplace, the neighborhood, the tribe, the city, the race, the class, the nation, the state, humanity, or all of creation (Morrice 2000, 239)? Individuals belong to many, sometimes complementary, sometimes competing communities. It is not clear how communitarians can offer a coherent account of the socially constituted and encumbered individual, given the complexity of community membership. Moreover, as Bell points out, it is possible that communitarian's use of premature examples has reinforced the impression that there lack viable alternatives to liberalism in our modern world. Virtually no thinkers, after all, would seriously consider the plausibility of non-liberal alternatives proper for our modern societies if the alternatives are caste societies and fascism (Bell 2022).

Despite their respective merits, both communitarianism and liberalism suffer from a one-sided emphasis on the individual or the community in their philosophical reasoning. In the worst case, these two extremes are not only theoretically inadequate but also practically dangerous, tending towards asocial atomism or a version of totalitarianism that does not acknowledge individual rights.

It seems, then, that we should be looking for an alternative position beyond the communitarian-liberal debate, which nevertheless preserves their respective benefits while overcoming their respective flaws. The alternative should acknowledge the significance of particular communities (traditions, cultures, histories, and social and political institutions), but still maintain the value of the individual.³ It should also recognise universal ideas (individual autonomy, rights, freedom) that transcend particular communities. In short, to overcome the impasse, we need a systematic and coherent theory that both reconciles the genuine claims of the individual and the community, and also overcomes the distinctions between liberalism and communitarianism while preserving what is true in them.⁴

1.3 Hegel: Beyond the Liberal-Communitarian Debate

Hegel's social and political philosophy, especially his *Philosophy of Right* (Hereafter PR) provides such a theory. Indeed, one task of his social and political philosophy is precisely to reconcile the community with individuals, philosophically. Unlike contemporary communitarians, Hegel acknowledges the fundamental importance of individual rights. He recognises individual freedom as a universal value that transcends particular communities and therefore overcomes moral relativism. Unlike liberals, he emphasises the value of community, history, tradition, social and political institutions, and an organic understanding of the state. Hegel's social and political theory harmonizes the claims and significance of the individual and community

³ I use "community" and "individual" to refer the respective elements and tendencies of liberalism and communitarianism.

⁴ It calls for more research whether a third alternative beyond liberalism and communitarianism is preferable to a liberalism that recognizes and incorporates communitarian criticisms. As the debate continued in the 1990s, some convergence seemed to be occurring. Thus Bell (1993) and others began to talk of "the communalization of liberalism".

better than either contemporary liberals or communitarians. It thus merits our attention as a viable alternative for understanding our social and political world.

Philosophy, for Hegel, is "its own time apprehended in thoughts" (PR, Preface). That is why he writes that the owl of Minerva spreads her wings only at dusk: only when an activity is done is it possible to comprehend it fully in thought (PR, Preface). Taylor, therefore, suggests that we can understand Hegel's political philosophy as seeking to understand and address the deepest cultural conflicts and aspirations of its time (Taylor 1975). In modern times, Hegel claims, the central conflict is between the claims of an ancient communal ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) and that of the modern principle of individual freedom (Taylor 1975, 14). The *Philosophy of Right* defends the view that it is only in the modern state — with its rational rule of law and system of individual rights — that the reconciliation between these diverse interests becomes possible.

The most devastating contradiction for the modern individual stems from the attempt to embody two contrasting ideals of the human subject. The "expressivist" ideal sees man as a "living expressive unity" (Taylor 1975, 2), which is essentially part of, and not opposed to, the natural and social world. The Kantian perspective of radical freedom, by contrast, defines the human ideal as autonomous, completely self-determining and independent of all external considerations, natural and social. It was Hegel's task to reconcile these two ideals.

In his philosophical writings, the major issue that Hegel deals with is how to reconcile the legitimate claim of individual autonomy with sociopolitical institutions that enable yet distort individual autonomy, at once. Taylor claims that Hegel does this by construing the natural and social worlds as themselves expressions or embodiments of what Hegel calls spirit (*Geist*). This construal is supposed to allow the individual subject to be free, i.e., independent of external natural and social determinations. Hegel's approach allows man to stop regarding these givens as external and to see them instead as necessary features of spirit (*Geist*), with which man identifies and of which he is the "vehicle." Taylor concludes that "[f]reedom for man thus means the free realisation of a vocation which is largely given" (Taylor 1975, 29). Hegel's philosophy reconciles the given and the free.

Taylor rightly points out that Hegel was influenced by expressivism and should be understood as a philosopher who emphasises the importance of community (e.g., organism, wholeness). However, Taylor is wrong to claim that Hegel should ultimately be read as siding with communitarianism in the conflict between the community and individual freedom. Although it is true, for example, that Hegel seems agree with Aristotle's view of the soul as a "self-organising form" inseparable from a particular organic body (*Enzyklopaedie*, para. 378, cited from Schwarzenbach 1991, 552), he disagrees with Aristotle when it comes to the questioning of the conception of the person in the political thinking. Unlike the Ancient view, which seems to hold that individual lives are, by nature, fixed and given, Hegel claims that the subject must give purpose to itself. He names this the "principle of subjective freedom," which is the distinguishing mark of modernity. This principle was first acknowledged in the modern state in the universal right of free personality (PR, 182, 185). Far from opposing that principle on communitarian grounds, Hegel embraces it as a decisive step in the progress of *Geist*. Taylor thus exaggerates Hegel's affiliation

with such romantic themes as wholeness and organic unity and blurs the significance of the claims of individual freedom in Hegel's political thought.

In fact, Hegel does not stand squarely on either side of the communitarian-liberal debate (Neuhouser 2000). He should not be read as a liberal or as a communitarian. Instead, he presents a unique, systematic philosophical system, fitting into neither box. Labelling Hegel as either liberal or communitarian risks losing the coherence of his thought or distorting his ideas for the sake of strengthening either individual or community. Hegel's systematic philosophical system itself, with proper reading and slight revision, can provide resources for a third alternative meant to understand and guide today's society.

Hegel is not a communitarian. One of his most important aims is to integrate liberalism's emphasis on the fundamental rights and interests of individuals with the Romantic view that society is an organism and not a collection of equal and essentially identical individuals (Neuhouser 2000, 16). Further, he does not advocate securing the state's interests at the expense of individuals' interests or protecting existing institutions from criticism; he argues that the state should recognize the right of individual conscience and foster the conditions that facilitate its people in developing the capacities required to employ such individual conscience. Moreover, he insists that there are universally valid or "absolute" criteria by which the goodness of a particular society's institutions and practices can be judged (Neuhouser 2000, 16).

More specifically, communitarianism lacks Hegel's conception of freedom. Alan Patten is correct in asserting that "The key to understanding Hegel's social philosophy ... is coming to terms with his idea of freedom (Patten 1999, 4)." Hegel highlights the centrality of individual freedom by suggesting that the social whole is not rational if it fails to foster and protect the good of its individuals. In terms of Isaiah Berlin's categories, Hegel's conception of freedom is a version of "positive freedom." It is an account of rational self-determination. Although some communitarians may claim that Hegel inspired their theories or provided ground on which their arguments were built, Hegel's conception of freedom is different from the communitarian conception of the self. Baynes (2002) rightly argues that Hegel does not identify freedom with public virtue or public happiness. Rather, Hegel's notion of freedom as rational self-determination is overlapping in many significant aspects with Habermas's intersubjective or recognitional notion of freedom (Habermas 1985). I agree that freedom, for Hegel, is not a static status—it is a social status, the actualization and exercise of it essentially requires the recognition by other rational persons. Neuhouser (2000) also affirms this social and recognitional aspect.

Methodologically, communitarians emphasize the importance of interpretive framework and context (e.g., particular beliefs, social traditions, times, cultures) in shaping moral and political judgment. Ontologically, communitarians insist that human selves are heavily embedded and embodied agents in this world and that they have a crucial interest in leading communal lives and promoting communal loyalty and attachments, both of which challenge the possibility and desirability of freedom as self-determination and autonomy assumed by liberals. Although Hegel was not a liberal, his conception of freedom as recognition and self-determination—a concept that is more comprehensive and demanding than liberal freedom—does not square

with communitarianism. Since Hegel's conception of freedom essentially "develops and extends Kant's idea of freedom as acting under or from (certain kinds of) reasons" (Baynes 2002, 3) and also harbors intersubjective and recognitional facets, then we can observe that communitarianism lacks the essential elements that Hegel's account of freedom possesses. It is, after all, not freedom as recognition and self-determination, but context and communal attachment, that characterize communitarianism.

Thus, Hegel gives greater weight than communitarians to individual freedom and rights, and believes his social and political philosophy provided an important model in the history of the philosophy of freedom. Freedom, for Hegel, is also a system of social and political institutions that secure basic rights for citizens. In PR, he depicts a system of practices and institutions that he thinks constitute modern freedom. The first principles of his "liberalism" are principles of political and civic freedom, which are supposed to be prioritised over other principles that may also be invoked (Rawls and Herman 2000, 330). Rawls and Herman (2000) also contends that Hegel's notion of the role and responsibility of political philosophy in the real social and political world is connected to Hegel's preference for freedom. The conception of freedom is so crucial for Hegel that he always connects particularistic, communal love to the essential universal principle of freedom which, in turn, restricts the particularistic commitment. Any emphasis Hegel gives to particularistic notions such as community and patriotism presuppose, serve, and are eventually checked by, his ultimate pursuit of freedom.

Hegel believes that the most proper system of institutions for the expression of freedom already exists. The task of philosophy, especially political philosophy, is to comprehend this scheme conceptually in thought. When we comprehend that our social world expresses our freedom and enables us to realise our freedom in our daily lives, we become reconciled to that world. The modern state, expressing the freedom of persons in its political and social institutions, is not fully actual until its citizens understand how and why they are free in it. The task of political philosophy is to help them to understand that.

Despite the differences between Hegel and contemporary communitarians, however, Hegel's social and political theory does not represent another version of liberalism. Wood (1991) correctly points out that Hegel was, for sure, a moderate supporter of institutions and policies that we now consider as part of the liberal tradition. But liberalism, Wood suggests, usually not only refers to certain policies but also a more fundamental philosophical rationale for these policies and tendencies which share a similar vision and ethos. The liberal vision and ethos, Wood insightfully points out, is an individualistic one; liberals tend to conceive society as the outcome of the interactions of individuals who are advancing their individual, instead of collective or transcendental, ends. Liberals also commonly suspect any grand theories that seek to interpret or predict human destiny or promote certain comprehensive concepts of the good. The liberal spirit, Wood suggests, is a preference for the protection of individual rights and freedoms, and faith that individuals should be left to find their own good in order for humanity to progress. It is also a "moralistic spirit, for which individual conscience, responsibility and decency are paramount values" (Wood 1991). Although Hegel endorses some of the policies and ideas that

liberals support, he sees the rationale(s) for liberalism as inherently limited and the practice of them may potentially destruct the very values they most seek to promote.

Liberalism can be salvaged only if we place it in the context of a grander vision, "which measures the subjective goals of individuals by a larger objective and collective good, and assigns to moral values a determinate, limited place in the total scheme of things" (Wood 1991). In this sense, Wood (1991) describes Hegel as one of its most profound critics of liberalism. Indeed, Hegel offers a powerful critique of key Enlightenment liberal doctrines, including its notion of atomistic individualism, a negative conception of liberty, and its neutrality with regard to the ultimate human good. In recognizing the central role of community, or *Sittlichkeit*, Hegel decidedly moves away from Enlightenment ideas and provides an important alternative to current versions of liberalism. One crucial difference between Hegel and liberalism is that Hegel assigns great importance to the human need to experience oneself as belonging to a larger social reality, a reality whose being and significance transcend one's own particular projects and finite life span. Although liberalism does not necessarily ignore this need, they do not find it to be one of the most important issues of political philosophy. Neuhaus points out that the opposite is usually the case: the liberal tradition is motivated by a desire to avert the dangers associated with the "powerful human longing to have a part in the life of a being larger than oneself" (Neuhaus 2000, 16). Despite these dangers, Neuhaus suggests, a social and political theory should properly address and recognise this need, rather than disavow or marginalise it. Otherwise, these needs "do not simply dissipate but reassert themselves instead in estranged and more malevolent guises" (Neuhaus 2000, 16).

Hegel also critiques liberalism for its failure to comprehend just how deeply rooted a person is in the established framework of their socio-political institutions. "Person" is, for Hegel, not a natural kind of term but a socio-political construct. His concern and methodology on this point reveal his continuity with and departure from the natural rights tradition. In Part 1 of *Philosophy of Right*, he is concerned with the nature and limits of human relationships treating one another as persons. This helps him to move beyond a person's particular relationships that are formed and towards a more abstract notion of human relationships, which can also be seen in the social contractarian's conception of the state of nature. A person for these philosophers is based on a fictional narrative that took place long ago and, from which, they would abstract universal (or quasi-universal) rights that are, coincidentally, equally applicable in modern contexts. Hegel is more focused on persons as they are found in the modern context (*PR*, 40, 57), as this is the point of development at which freedom can finally be both actualized and extended to all people. Hegel's person is more bound to their historical circumstances than that of contractarian's such as Hobbes and Locke. This allows a person to have a greater degree of autonomy when it comes to their membership within a political community (Schwarzenbach 1991, 552).

Hegel's notion of freedom incorporates several dimensions. It is neither the external constraints of the physical world nor the personal, inner, and moral lives of individuals which must be brought to order. In addition to these, Hegel argues, one must also overcome limits placed on them by life in relation to others. Through education, one can be made aware of these higher ends and attain what he terms

“substantial freedom” (PR, 149, 260) — a higher level of positive freedom in which the individual is liberated both from dependence on their natural impulses and from the immediate subjectivity that is incapable of guiding actions. Substantial freedom is suitable for humans insofar as it is able to balance the needs of social life with that of the individual—this community-wide “reciprocal recognition” of freedom as “lived social practice” is termed *Sittlichkeit*, or “rational ethical life” (Schwarzenbach 1991, 553).

Neuhouseur claims that Hegel endorses a romantic idea that views the social order as an organism and emphasises the importance of substantive, identity-constituting attachments to social groups (Neuhouseur 2000, 15). Wolff also mentions this holistic, organic dimension of Hegel’s political and social philosophy when he suggests that the Philosophy of Right should be read as a “science of the State” (Wolff 2004, 292). For Hegel, Wolff argues, philosophy’s distinctive feature and the ultimate task is to comprehend a “whole” on the basis of its own immanent, self-organising character, that is, as an “organism.” It is only through this type of comprehension that the self can be unfolded as a structured and organised system (Wolff 2004, 293). The task of political philosophy that treats the inner and external features of the state as its object was equal to understanding it as an organism, a self-organising whole. Hegel even conflates the organic character of the state with the claim that the state is something that has gradually grown into its current being and, therefore, cannot be fabricated (Wolff 2004, 293). Through this organic understanding of the state and his emphasis on wholeness, Hegel’s practical philosophy gives due weight to the significance of community when compared to liberals.

In the first reference to the organic concept of the state in the body of the PR, Hegel declares that it is through “the form of thought” that “the spirit is objective and actual to itself as an organic totality in laws and institutions, i.e., in its own will as thought.” He also considers “this form of thought” as a “moment” of the “infinite form” that “ethical substance” acquires “in the development of civil society” (PR, 256). For Hegel, then, the political organism gives rise to both its organization and the method through which we can understand it. This connection between the state’s germination and hermeneutical justification of itself establishes the state as an organic whole. Later, Karl Marx would comment on this element of the PR as a true “discovery” and a great “advance to consider the political state as an organism, and thus to consider the differentiation of powers no longer mechanically but rather as a living and rational distinction” (Marx 1982, 12, cited in Wolff 2004, 293).

Hegel’s philosophy and especially his notion of freedom, therefore, help us reconcile differences between communitarianism and liberalism. Whereas liberalism overemphasizes the individual, communitarianism tends to over-highlight the community. It is true that some communitarian thinkers like Taylor seek to either label Hegel as a communitarian or found their philosophies on him, he does not at all belong to the communitarian side. Hegel’s teachings on the movement of Geist (Absolute Spirit) and the realization of freedom tell us that both the classic conceptions of community and modern individualism are partially wrong; each of them is excessively extreme. Concern over the respective weakness of the two extreme doctrines (or lesser versions of them), I believe, formed an important, albeit partial, motive for Hegel when writing his Philosophy of Right, wherein he attempts

to reconcile the competing demands of the individual and community, as well as freedom and authority.

1.4 Hegel: A better Alternative

Hegel's concept of freedom can reconcile the differences that separate liberals and communitarians. Neuhouser (2000), for example, argues that Hegel understands freedom as self-determination. Since Hegel also takes the concept of freedom to be the telos of rational sociopolitical institutions, the major task of Hegel's social and political philosophy is to describe under what conditions humanity can be most self-determining. Hegel's basic answer is that the realization of full self-determination requires three types of practical freedoms: (1) personal freedom, whereby individuals are able to consider and select their own ends; (2) moral freedom, which permits individuals to consider and select their own conception of the good; and (3) social freedom, which obliges the creation of social and political institutions which help to secure the proceeding freedoms. Securing this permits individuals to consider and select their own identities in a meaningful, self-sustaining manner (Neuhouser 2000, 21). These three types of freedom exist in a hierarchical relationship, wherein the former type creates the grounding for the latter types, leading to increasing degrees of self-determination (Neuhouser 2000).

One of the most salient aspects of Hegel's concept of social freedom that helps it to draw in, and overcome, both liberal and contractarian theories is the presence of both objective and subjective elements, corresponding to what he calls the objective and subjective moments of *Sittlichkeit* (PR, 144, 146). The subjective facet of social freedom is secured when individuals develop "a conscious, voluntative relation to rational laws and institutions that makes their social participation into (subjectively) free activity" (Neuhouser 2000, 84). Individual freedom is heightened insofar as they are no longer beholden to institutions that can regulate their lives as something that is outside of or alien to them. Rather, individuals are able to see themselves and their lives as self-determined. In other words, subjective freedom consists of "the frame of mind, or disposition, of individual social members" (Neuhouser 2000, 53). Hegel does not argue, however, that individuals should impassively affirm the institutions and contexts they happen to live in relation to institutions themselves must be crafted and continue in a manner that is objectively worthy of an individual's subjective affirmation. Accordingly, in Hegel's model, social freedom is actualized in the individuals' subjective disposition and becomes objectively real in the social and political institutions of the rational social order. Hegel thus incorporates three distinctive conceptions of freedom in his philosophical system. For Hegel, personal and moral liberty are limited conceptions of freedom that can only ever be fulfilled when they are incorporated into a wider society that is characterized by social freedom. Hegel harmonizes the individual (subjective conscious) and the community (objective institutions) in his treatment of social freedom.

Furthermore, for Hegel, the state can be considered as an organic being only insofar as its "wholeness" is expressed in its parts, and the whole and its parts causally determine one another with respect to their form and their interconnection. Both the

parts and the whole with which modern humans interact and organize themselves should be measured according to the degree to which they help one to actualize their own freedom. This term, even within Hegel's thinking, must be bolstered by numerous institutions, practices, and principles so as to provide a fuller sense of what this freedom is directed towards (Honneth 2014). Only in the fully differentiated modern state, as encompassed by Hegel's philosophy, is freedom actual and rational.

Here, in Hegel's philosophical system, especially his conception of freedom, the individual and the community, the universal and the particular, the whole and the part, are well harmonised and incorporated into a comprehensive philosophical system. Neither element is overly emphasised in a way that either the theory itself or its application would lead to the same unfortunate consequences as the one-sided individualistic liberalism or communitarianism tend to cause. Because it takes the actualization of freedom as both the starting point and end of its practical philosophy, championing freedom as a universal value, Hegel's theory, when applied, is unlikely to suffer from the problems of excessive communitarian particularism, such as disadvantaging those who are not members of a certain community, neglecting universal values and moral principles that transcend state boundaries, and abusing power in a totalitarian manner in the name of particular communal interests and values. Hegel's practical philosophy can thus provide resources for overcoming the errors of communitarianism. On the other hand, emphasizing the state as an organic germination, as something that has grown and developed over time rather than something created at a particular point in time and therefore cannot simply be fabricated, Hegel's practical philosophy guards against liberal universalism that may culminate in the imperialism of one particular culture over others. Community values and structures described in his teaching are more difficult to neglect in the name of individual interest. Modern social problems such as alienation, rampant greed, a greater sense of loneliness, and increasing rates of urban crime and divorce are more likely placated in an organicist model than a liberal one. Individuals and governments in Hegel's philosophy no longer solely follow the individualistic maxim stated by Bentham and echoed by Thatcher that the "community is a fictitious body" and that the "interest of the community is ... the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it" (Bentham 1982, 12).

1.5 Hegel and China

Daniel A. Bell robustly advocates a China model, grounded in communitarian principles. For example, Bell (2016) asserts that China's political reform approach and governance in recent decades can be characterized as "meritocracy at the top, experimentation in the middle, and democracy at the bottom" (Bell 2016, 168). He christens this blend as "the China model," staunchly defending it against Western liberal democracy alternatives and authoritarianism, as seen in North Korea (Bell 2016, 6). In Bell's perspective, the China model successfully serves the public interest

through proficient governance by a self-regulating elite. The model's core premise is political meritocracy—those viewed as virtuous should lead (Bell 2016, 196). Bell's China model aims to reflect China's approach to political governance and reforms genuinely (Bell 2016, 79). Furthermore, Bell posits the China model as a guiding standard to assess China's political reform approach (Bell 2016, 78), advocating for its political feasibility and desirability.⁵

The philosophical core of Bell's China model is fundamentally communitarian. In this model, Confucianism inspires political meritocracy—the model's most critical element.⁶ Political meritocracy, a clear embodiment of a "just hierarchy" (Bell, 2020) as opposed to liberal, individualistic democracy, represents a refined version of Confucian political practice, reformed to adapt to modern society's complexities and capitalist globalization. According to Bell, Confucianism is inherently communitarian, emphasizing familial and societal relationships, moral education, and virtue cultivation. It underscores duties and responsibilities towards one's family, community, and society, closely aligning with communitarianism principles. In *China's New Confucianism*, Bell (2010) posits the resurgence of Confucianism in China as an implicit critique of Western individualism, endorsing more communitarian values. He suggests that Confucianism's revival could form a political communitarianism basis that could ethically regulate China's rapidly evolving, and often ruthlessly capitalist, society.

I appreciate Bell's communitarian notion of a China model. He indeed adeptly pinpointed and expressed one of the Chinese political practices' most conspicuous features in history and one of Confucianism's noblest principles—political meritocracy as a communitarian socio-political order. Although Bell advocates for a balance between individual rights and community responsibilities, I worry that labeling Confucianism as an active communitarianism doctrine and excessively accentuating China's communitarian image and reform may skew the balance and restrict understanding of China's past and future. It is undeniably true that Confucianism was the primary intellectual source in Chinese history and still plays a crucial role in shaping China's mentalities and practices. However, a more holistic understanding of China demands a more comprehensive and dialectic method—we also need to consider intellectual sources like Daoism and Chinese Legalism.⁷

In fact, I propose that political meritocracy serves as merely one of the essential principles of Chinese political philosophy and practice, under broader and more potent principles such as robust political pragmatism and what I call "eclectic

⁵ Hence, he contends that China should not strive to transition to another governance model, such as liberal democracy. Instead, China should enhance its current mixed model, ensuring the optimal functioning and benefit extraction from its meritocracy, experimentation, and democracy facets.

⁶ James Hankins, another defender of the idea of political meritocracy, also comments that the Confucian idea of political meritocracy is "the leading principle of the whole [Chinese] political system" (Hankins 2018, 48). There are other scholars who have established the connection between Confucianism and the current Chinese system of government such as Angel (2005), Bai (2012; 2013), Chan (2012). Bell in his *China's New Confucianism* (2010) also argues that Confucianism serves as a philosophical and ethical framework for navigating China's economic and political transformations.

⁷ Scholars such as Qin Hui (2015; 2019), for example, argue for Legalist principles' predominance in Chinese dynasties.

dynamism” (which refers to the Chinese state’s knack for deliberately establishing a framework where different and sometimes contradictory principles and mechanisms can work dialectically, creating a space for political innovations and possibilities). To offer a more comprehensive, thus more accurate, understanding of China and a suggestion for China’s future reform, we should strive to grasp the most profound, abstract principles and mentalities of Chinese politics and societies that are most essential and enduring.

Reducing the rich Chinese political ideas and practices into Confucian, communitarian meritocracy risks excessively essentializing some particular and secondary principles, practices, and ethos as China herself, thereby limiting the political possibilities and imaginations that could be more productive. A Confucian, communitarian China model—once the label is fixed—would inevitably exhibit some communitarianism’s inherent features, which itself contains serious issues.

However, borrowing insights from Hegel’s philosophy—which doesn’t advocate either liberalism or communitarianism, promotes a higher level of mentalities and principles that seek to reconcile individual and community claims, seeks to overcome the communitarianism and liberalism dichotomy, and showcases an ethos also inherent in Chinese moral and political philosophy—with modifications, could significantly enhance our understanding of China and even revive some of the most profound principles latent in Chinese political thought itself (such as the principles of “eclectic dynamism” and Daoist emphasis on holistic and dialectic thinking). An understanding of China from a more Hegelian perspective could transcend the dichotomies between liberalism and communitarianism, generating a greater space for reconciling elements necessary for China’s continued modernization. In particular, Hegel can offer insights for China, a nation vigorously moving towards modernization. Certain elements of Hegel’s approach (including some concepts and philosophy ethos) can directly provide insights into and guidance for the process of Chinese modernization. More importantly, Hegel’s reflections on early nineteenth century Europe could inspire us to develop a political theory beneficial to China’s 21st-century modernization.

At first glance, it may appear that Hegel cannot help modern China. The issue of applicability is especially concerning given that Hegel himself views Chinese history as static and non-dialectical, and that Hegel’s political philosophy is decisively European and based on a philosophy of history that is limited to European modernity. In the first chapter of the PR, for instance, Hegel acknowledges ancient China as the beginning of history and describes Chinese history as static. Since the Chinese empire is “at once the oldest and newest” and “every change is excluded,” without development in the spirit of the Chinese people, China does not have history (Hegel 1956, 116). Given that, for Hegel, the end of history is the actualization of freedom and the beginning of history must be unfree, by definition, China does not move towards freedom. Hegel also critiqued the Chinese for not distinguishing between spirit and nature, for holding their highest authority to be nature, and for exclusively founding their moral and political institutions on these ideas.

It is also true that Hegel’s philosophy is profoundly “Euro-centric.” The centers of the spiritual development for Hegel have been always in Europe: “The Mediterranean Sea is the unifying element, and the center of World-History” (Hegel 1956,

87). Some of Hegel's predications were simply wrong, e.g., it is indeed the case that the world after the death of Hegel has witnessed the historical decline of Europe and the relative rise and swift development of other non-European, "static" countries like China. Habermas, therefore, was not wrong when he writes that "Hegel's political philosophy cannot simply be projected without difficulty onto the plane of the twentieth century" (Habermas 1999, 193); one may rightly suggest that it would be even harder to use Hegel to contribute to the development of modern China.

However, one needs to separate the historical limits and contingency of Hegel from the philosophical insights he can offer. A philosophical framework designed to address European issues, with proper readings and extensions, can also shed light on Chinese concerns. Hegel's failure to anticipate the historical rise of China and his rash conclusion of the end of history are also understandable; after all, Hegel wrote when China was isolated from the West. A decade after Hegel's death in 1831, the beginning of the First Opium War anticipated the start of the Chinese modernity. Some misunderstanding or oversimplification of Chinese history and philosophy is, perhaps, due to Hegel's lack of adequate, unbiased data about China; it might be that a lack of proper translation or proper readings led Hegel to erroneously conclude that Chinese philosophy does not go beyond nature.⁸ However, the predictive and interpretive failures of Hegel's thought do not weaken the strength and profoundness of the whole ethos and framework of Hegel's philosophy. A seemingly weak critique of Chinese history does not necessarily render Hegel's philosophy of history less compelling. A philosophical system meant to interpret one particular can be extended to interpret another particular. Although he misdiagnosed China as undialectical and nonhistorical and also failed to foresee the radical historical changes that China has made, Hegel nevertheless provides an effective framework and ethos for us to comprehend China and address Chinese issues.

Given these limitations, I argue that it is neither the particular answers and diagnoses Hegel made with an eye on his own particular European questions, nor the totality of his doctrines, nor his preferred political institutions, nor his views on Chinese history that could potentially be beneficial to modern China. After all, Hegel was a child of his own context and culture. I believe that it is, at some abstract level, a certain ethos and guiding framework of Hegel—how Hegel tried to comprehend his contemporary reality and how he sought to address European issues in his time—that can serve as a resource for providing insights into modern China. In other words, Hegel's philosophy indicates a grounding upon which a more profound

⁸ For example, I would argue that Chinese Legalism — an arguably more important and influential school of thought in Chinese political practices since Qin (秦)— does not rely on the concept of Nature and instead pursues a kind of political stability and control that are independent of any metaphysical concerns. Confucianism and Daoism generally seek neither a harmony of Man and Nature nor aim to establish moral and political order by imitating this harmony as Hegel critiqued. The political languages (such as Harmony and Nature) used by Chinese empires and scholars were mainly ideological; they harnessed those concepts to achieve their political aims such as stability and social control. Although it contains some misunderstandings, Hegel's criticism that Chinese philosophy relies exclusively (or, at least excessively) on the harmony of nature and humans, and that China's moral and political system was designed in ways to achieve this harmony is insightful. However, this topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

analysis of China can occur, and, in turn, help produce a deeper comprehension of the issues she faces today.

China's modernization has occurred through concerted efforts to produce rapid, fundamental changes in her economic, social, and political structures. This shift, along with technological advances, have also created difficulties for China. Problems include those brought about by economic inequality and globalization, as well as the changing relationships between: the state and civil society, the state and individuals, and freedom and equality. Each of these difficulties are interconnected and center around abstract concepts, so a holistic approach is best able to address them. Here is where Hegel's comprehensive, critical, and dialectical approach would be able to help.

Hegel carefully sheds light on the importance of the state and teaches how to cautiously philosophize the boundaries between the state and civil society. In PR (260), the state is the place where people's "concrete freedom" is actualized as we perceive ourselves in our complete social and political reality. The state is the culmination of all moral activities, and where all elements of society are nourished within the whole. The state in Hegel's mind is more robust and active than liberals allow. The structure of civil society is unstable, whereas the state—as the locus of political authority—guarantees unity and stability. With the development of capitalism and increased globalization, the sphere of civil society (which includes the market) and the state became interlocked. Methods of production and modern economies are often seen as being so complex that the mediation of the state becomes necessary (Habermas 1998). However, if the state becomes overly-intrusive and acquires economic functions, civil society becomes politicized. Hegel correctly assigns different burdens to different spheres of society. The powerful state should not sublimate civil society, otherwise it would degenerate into a tool to satisfy the particular interests and demands of particular groups, which denies the proper function of the state. Hegel's state should focus on the universal rather than the particular.

However, excessive individualism, unmitigated pursuit of private interests, and marketization and privatization of the public exacerbated by neoliberal principles and by an unmediated market frequently harms underprivileged individuals. While the capitalist market offers employment opportunities, it is not as almighty as neoliberal ideology insists. The pursuit of economic efficiency in production leads to surplus production and the development of machines that replace workers, thereby exacerbating economic inequality. These newly marginalized individuals lose not only their livelihood, but also the opportunity to secure their autonomy as a member of the moral community. Hegel points out that the deprivation of one's ability to acquire property is tantamount to their nonrecognition. This denial of recognition and loss of autonomy results in one's spiritual death. Hegel questions the weak liberal state—authoritarian figure like "Caesar accredits the limits of liberalism" and the "rule of law cannot sustain itself abstractly and normatively bracket off the contradictions proper to civil society" (Cristi 2005, 22).

In light of the limits displayed in modern, globalized markets, I offer an updated version of Hegel's conception of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) wherein the state and civil society can be reconciled. Here, the state is empowered to intervene as needed to address some conflicts and curb the side-effects generated in Chinese civil society.

Hegel supports neither laissez-faire systems nor pure authoritarianism, but seeks to address issues of the redistribution of wealth and economic equality, on the one hand, and economic freedom, on the other. Hegel calls for both a separation between the state and civil society, and a capable government that is able to intervene and take responsibility in the economic sphere. Hegel recognizes that self-interest exists and allows space for it to operate but is also comfortable in insisting that it may need to be restricted or redirected towards the public good. Hegel notes that the modern state is an organic whole. The updated Hegelian dialectical ethos proposed here supports a state that takes a more active role in fostering the types of freedom Hegel describes. Using this model, the Chinese state can take a more hands-on approach to “create” these freedoms and work to reconcile tensions between the community and the individual.

It is also insightful of Hegel to point out the importance of reconciling the *state* and its *subjects*. Hegel argues that in our modern world, an essential role of the state is to facilitate its subjects to perceive themselves and their freedom, and for them to view the state as the embodiment of the greater realization of their freedom. Although Hegel was dissatisfied with this one-sided principle of free subjectivity and offered the most fundamental criticism of modern liberalism, he correctly insisted that the attempts to secure this type of freedom are necessary for modern states if they hope to incorporate the later, more systematic, types of freedom he describes. Thus, at least at some developmental stages, the state is encouraged to take the sort of active role proposed by this updated ethos.

Hegel teaches us that individuals need to have insights into the universal interests of the state and the community. Subjects should not be compelled to feel as if they were governed by a completely external force, but should willingly perceive themselves to be following the dictates of their own reason and free will; legislative principles and other forces that govern them should consciously be considered as tightly connected to, or derived from, their own reason and free will. The state should not treat its subjects as children; rather, the state should allow its subjects to participate in political and legislative processes, thereby fostering their own sense independence, confidence, responsibility, and duties. Hegel’s concept of history draws a people or nation into political consciousness. In becoming aware of their political duties as citizens rather than subjects, a people can move towards freedom and thus become historical. It is only through a union of the will of citizens and the state that an actual and concrete right can be actualized. Given that Hegel’s end of dialectical history is a kind of freedom that must be realized in society through political institutions, the state should not only be aware of the value of Hegel’s notion of freedom but also struggle to realize it and to give it concrete institutional expression. One important institutional aspect of such struggles is for the state to further recognize the rights of personality and autonomies.

This is certainly not an easy task. Hegel was well aware that subjective freedom alone is not enough in the complex, modern world. He saw that neither freedom of rights nor freedom of morals were adequate to genuinely realize the more complex facets of freedom in the modern world. Hegel’s understanding of human beings is indeed insightful; in addition to individualistic, rational autonomy, he conceived of humans as having deep emotional attachments to systematic interconnections; they

require a deep-rooted orientation to community. Hence, Hegel's understanding and defence of the complexities of the concept of freedom, his dialectical understanding of the individual and the collective that transcends the typical views of liberalism and communitarianism, and his recognition of the dialectical relationship between the individual and the state, provide well-balanced and well-reconciled insights and inspiration for China's modernization and socialist state building.

Hegel also shows how to analyze a society and address its issues as a *whole* in a profound and systematic manner. Unlike many social scientific or humanistic approaches that try to understand a society from a particular perspective (e.g., excessively economic, institutional, or cultural), Hegel provides a prototype of philosophical analysis that seeks to grasp the whole in order to analyze the parts. For instance, his conception of spirit is comprehensive because it encompasses a wide spectrum of the dimensions in human societies that are inter-linked such as morality, culture, ethics, as well as economic and political institutions. To understand the totality of the reality, he probes the (almost) complete spectrum of human activities — including but not limited to history, morality, politics, religion, philosophy, art, and science. The holistic and quasi-organic flavor of his investigation allows for a more profound and accurate understanding of human societies in an historicized way. Any particularistic analysis, I fear, would easily lead to partial understandings which, once employed, would yield problematic implications. For example, an empirical-minded social scientist who prefers institutional analysis of materialistic variables that can be measured statistically would underestimate the extreme importance of moral principles that guide the mindsets and social behaviors of a people. This oversight would undermine the proper interpretation of the fullness of a society. Hegel's dialectical method also allows one to view a society as if it is a living whole that is advancing and moving. The emphasis on the holistic investigation through a historicized perspective would thus help scholars and policy makers in China better understand the particular situation of China's position in history and address the social and economic issues in a more holistic and fundamental way. Hegel's dialectical method finally renders it possible to integrate elements and insights from the seemingly different positions of Hegel's European history and that of modern China.

2 Conclusion

The debate between liberals and communitarians is marked by their respective emphasis on their own perspectives at the expense of the other. This lack of a middle ground precludes the opportunity for a synthesis of the two sides if one relies on the terms as they are found in the contemporary debate. Rather than continuing to push for an “either/or” solution to this, a coherent, systematic social and political theory can offer a “both/and” option. This third way, as presented by a reinterpreted understanding of Hegel as presented here, would be capable of reconciling the individual and the community. Overcoming the debate is not possible on its terms. What is needed instead is a coherent, systematic social and political theory that can harmonise the claims of the individual and the community, of individual freedom and socio-political context, of part and whole, of universal and particular,

and of objective and subjective. Unlike individualistic liberals, Hegel believes we must understand and treat individuals as shaped by the broad context of historically restricted social and political institutions, i.e., as part of an organic, objective, particular, historical and cultural whole. Unlike communitarians, he prioritises the universal principles of political and civic freedoms and rights for individuals as the foundation of his practical philosophy. The task of his practical philosophy is for individuals to understand their social world as an expression of their freedom, to which they can then be rationally reconciled. Readings that push Hegel to either side in the liberal-communitarian debate are less desirable than those that see him balancing the sides from a more inclusive perspective, an organicist philosophy that acknowledges both the value of the individual and his belonging to a whole that reflects his essence back to him.

As with all authors, some of Hegel's arguments have not stood the test of time.⁹ Thinkers like Karl Marx have also profoundly critiqued the limits of Hegel.¹⁰ However, the essence of his social and political thought, with careful and updated readings, can also be valuable for Chinese modernity. The examples I have described—such as a capable and responsible state, a proper boundary between the state and civil society, and a reconciliation between the state and the individuals—all serve as a precursory investigation meant to invite more research on using resources in political theory to aid contemporary China. Further research would be benefited by exploring a more nuanced reconciliation between political philosophers such as Hegel and the Chinese (economic, sociopolitical, intellectual, etc.) reality and Chinese traditions of political thought (Confucianism, Chinese Legalism, and Daoism).

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

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⁹ For example, except for the weaknesses I have mentioned in the section about Hegel and China, his analogy of the family wherein he likens men to animals and women to plants has more in common with parodies of sexist writing than higher-order philosophy.

¹⁰ See Marx (1975) and Boer (2023a, b), for instance.

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Qi Jing Born in China, Qi Jing pursued a diverse educational background before embarking on his recent academic journey. He completed his Bachelor of Arts, majoring in Political Science and Philosophy, at the Australian National University. His thirst for philosophical understanding led him to pursue an Honors year in Philosophy at the University of Sydney. Subsequently, he undertook a Master of Arts in Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. Currently, he is engaged in doctoral studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he specializes in Political Theory. His research is marked by a discerning focus on Chinese conceptions of the state and sovereignty. In addition, he critically engages with contemporary normative political philosophy and Chinese politics. A central ambition of his work is to act as a bridge between Eastern and Western political theories. Through this synthesis, he aspires to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of global political dynamics. His scholarly contributions are distinguished by an exacting rigor and originality. By interweaving theoretical perspectives and empirically grounded analysis, he has made significant contributions to the academic community. His work is valued not only for its depth but also for its potential to foster dialogue and understanding across cultures in an increasingly interconnected world.