

Foundations of Chinese Culture

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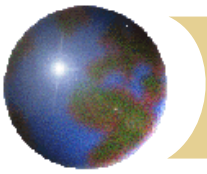
CMU Osher Course
September 2023



Outline

- ❖ Individualism and collectivism
- ❖ Universalism and its absence
- ❖ Yin/yang cosmology
- ❖ Daoism
- ❖ Confucianism: Family
- ❖ Confucianism: Leadership
- ❖ Confucianism: Education
- ❖ Buddhism
- ❖ Confucian ethics: Corruption
- ❖ Confucian ethics: Loyalty and contractual obligation





Individualism & collectivism

✿ Ontological foundation of culture

- ✦ *Individualism:* humans are **autonomous individuals**.
- ✦ *Collectivism:* the unit of human existence is the **group**.
 - In collectivist China, it is the **family**.
 - Individuals are not fully formed human beings in isolation from the family.





Individualism & collectivism

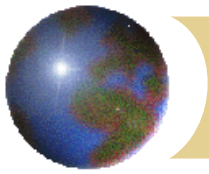
- ⊕ Individualism and behavior norms
 - ⊞ If individuals are autonomous, they are fundamentally **equal**.
 - Autonomous = self-governing.
 - ⊞ Then how can **social order** be maintained?
 - They must **adhere to rules**. Therefore...
 - **Rules must have authority**.
 - While **adherence must be voluntary**.
 - How is this **possible**?



Individualism & collectivism

- ❖ Individualism and universalism
 - ❖ Individuals must recognize rules as **inherently reasonable**.
 - ...and worthy of voluntary adherence.
 - ❖ Different individuals must recognize the **same rules** as reasonable.
 - They must **agree** on what is reasonable.
 - ❖ How is this possible?
 - There must be a **universal standard of what is reasonable and just**.



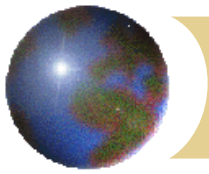


Individualism & collectivism

✿ Collectivism and care

- ✦ Social norms are based on **care** as opposed to abstract justice principles.
 - So, we have **obligations to an in-group**: family, village, clan, company, etc.
 - Norms come from **authority figures** (due to **high power distance**) in the group.
 - Enforcement by **direct supervision** is natural, and **shame-based** rather than guilt-based.
 - **Care-based** cultures can be **masculine or feminine**.





Universalism & its absence

- ✦ Emphasis on abstract justice
 - ❑ Westerners are concerned about needs in far-away countries.
 - While perhaps **neglecting** their own families and friends at home.
 - ❑ Chinese focus on welfare of families and associates.
 - While seeing matters abroad as **none of their business**.





Universalism

✦ Religious origins.

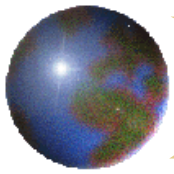
✦ Abrahamic religions are **monotheistic**.

- ...and see the Deity as a **lawgiver**.
- It follows that the **moral law must be universal**.

✦ **Missionaries** are sent to instruct other peoples.

- Perhaps beginning with Jonah's mission to Nineveh.
- Story appears in Hebrew scripture, Christian Old Testament, and Qur'an.





Universalism

❖ International repercussions.

❖ "American values are universal."

- Claim by George W. Bush, at a press conference with European Union members, 20 June 2005, in Washington D.C.
- Claim by Barack Obama, in a speech to UN General Assembly, 25 Sept 2012



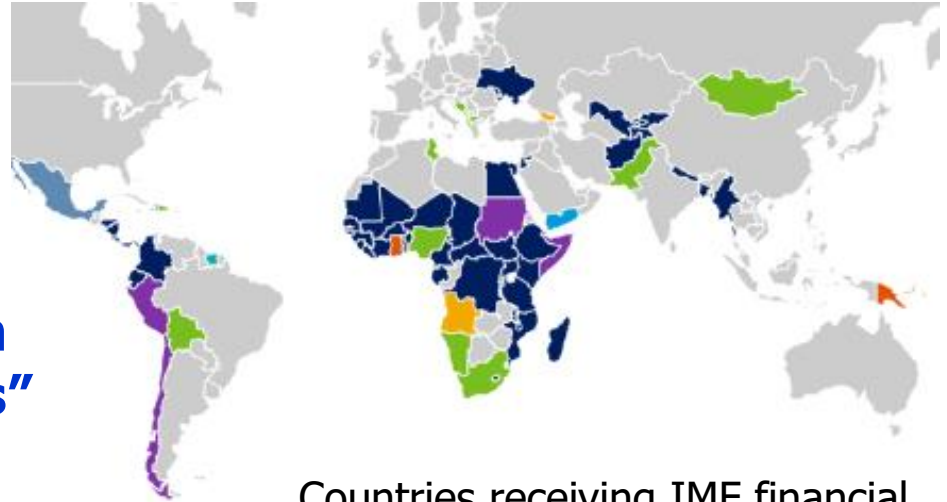


Universalism

International repercussions.

IMF, World Bank* dispatch **economic “missionaries”** to developing economies

- Particularly during the heyday of neoliberalism and the Washington consensus.
- Financial assistance offered in exchange for adoption of **free-market** policies, **privatization**, and austerity that **reduces social services**.
- Mixed results, including “debt bondage” for some countries.



Countries receiving IMF financial assistance, 2020-2022

*President of World Bank must be an American.
Head of IMF has always been a European.



Universalism

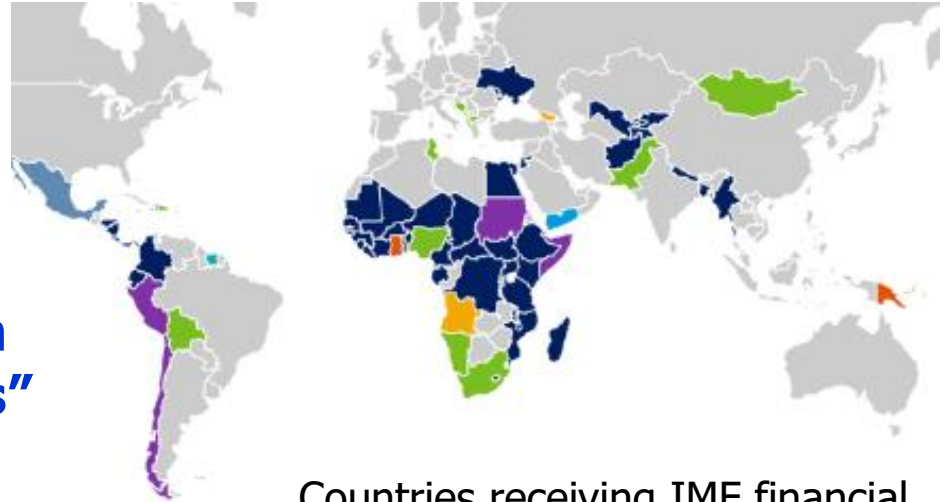
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China rejected the West’s universalizing economic theory

- and achieved **spectacular growth**, while the West succumbed to the 2008 financial crisis.



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Universalism

- ❖ International repercussions.
 - ❖ Attempt to build a **world order** based on universal (i.e. Western) principles.
 - Similar motivation for multilateral trade agreements (WTO, GATT)



INTERNATIONAL COURT
OF JUSTICE



WORLD TRADE
ORGANIZATION



Universalism

- ✚ International repercussions.
 - ✚ Western insistence on **human rights** in bilateral negotiations on other matters.
 - Sometimes complicating the negotiation process.



Chinese commerce minister Gao Hucheng and Australian prime minister Tony Abbot concluding 2015 free trade agreement. Human rights in China were an important element of the negotiation. China ended up making few concessions.



Universalism

- ✦ International repercussions.
 - ✦ By contrast, Chinese have **no interest** in the internal affairs of negotiating partners.
 - For example, they do not ask Americans to **reduce gun violence, stop police brutality, or take care of their elders.**
 - This can give them a bargaining advantage



“China adheres to the principle of non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs.”

Chinese Foreign Ministry representative Wang Wenbin, in press conference, 28 Aug 2023.



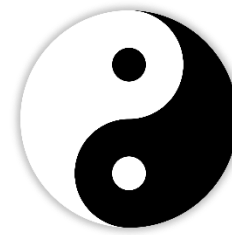
Universalism

- ⊕ Domestic repercussions.
 - ⊞ “Culture wars”
 - Each side wants to **universalize** its moral perspective...
 - ..and therefore **shakes its finger** at the other side.
 - Actually, a “war” between **judgmental factions** within a single universalizing culture.

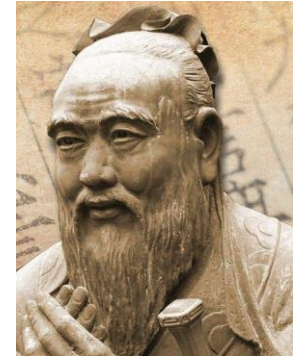




Chinese religions?



道



☉ Domestic traditions

☒ *Yīn/yáng* cosmology, **Daoism**, **Confucianism**

- Closer to **philosophies** than what Westerners call religions
- **No clear distinction** among religion/superstition/philosophy.
- Many languages have no word for "religion."

☒ **Folk** religions

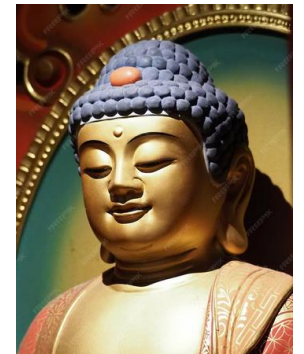
- Polytheistic practices similar to those elsewhere in the world.



☉ Imported religion

☒ Mahayana **Buddhism** with Chinese flavor

- Fills a lacuna in indigenous traditions?

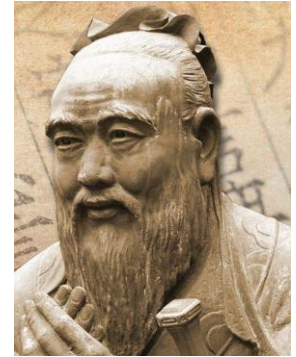




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Folk religions

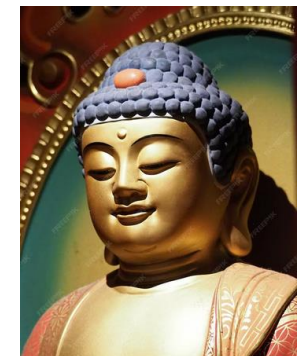
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Imported religion

Mahayana Buddhism with Chinese flavor

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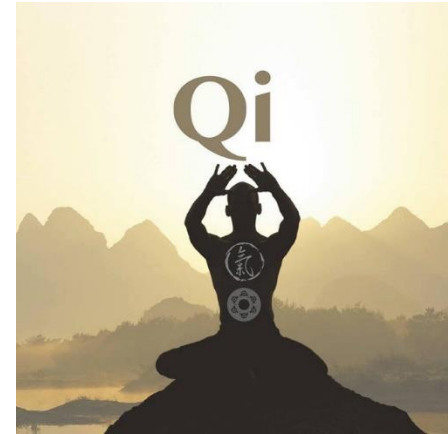
Focus on influence in contemporary culture...



Yīn/yáng cosmology

☯ **Complementarity**

- ☒ Opposites generate *qi* (roughly, negative entropy)
 - Cold/hot, female/male, dark/light, etc.

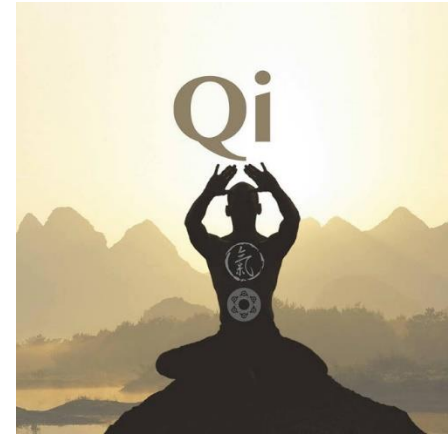


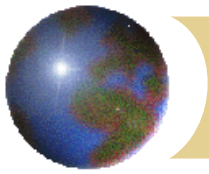


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 - Roots in Zoroastrian religion (Ahura Mazda, Angra Mainyu).

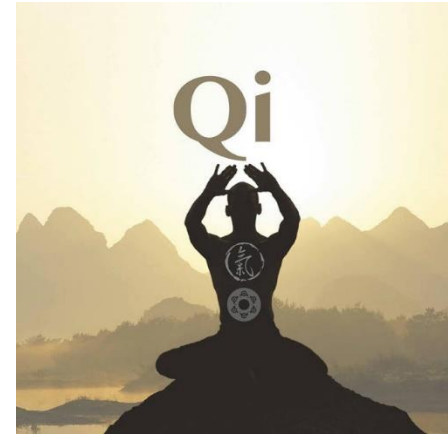




Yīn/yáng cosmology

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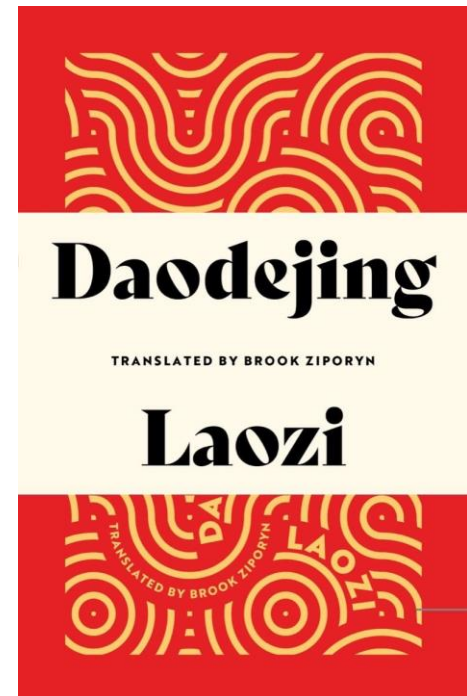
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 - Cold/hot, female/male, dark/light, etc.
- ❏ Differs from Western **good/evil duality**
 - Roots in Zoroastrian religion (Ahura Mazda, Angra Mainyu).
- ❏ The universe is **good**
 - Rather than a struggle between good and evil.
 - Problems (e.g. illness) result from **imbalance** or **misplacement** of *yīn* and *yáng*.

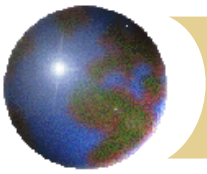




Daoism

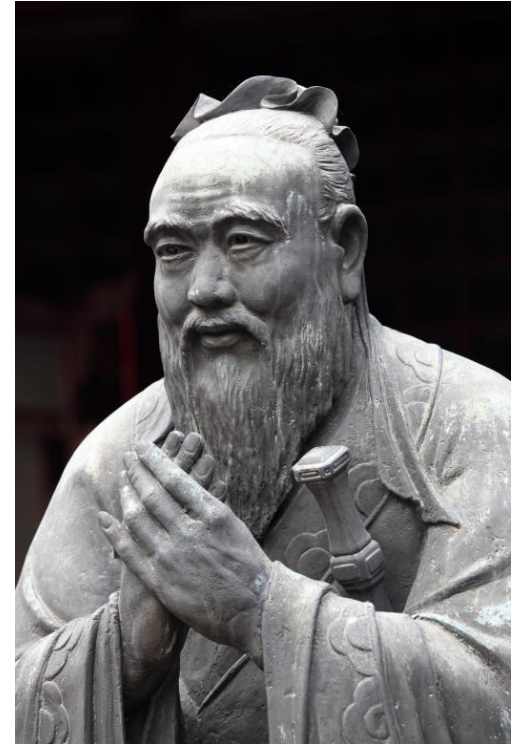
- ☉ Somewhat parallel to **Stoicism** in the West
 - ☒ Live according to nature
 - “Go with the flow.”
 - ☒ Perhaps not especially helpful for understanding today’s Chinese culture?
 - Much as Stoicism doesn’t really characterize today’s Western cultures.



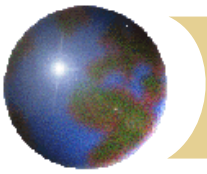


Confucianism

- ✦ Articulates the essentials of Chinese culture
 - ✦ Rather than providing a well-developed school of philosophy
 - Multiple interpretations.
 - Chinese generally don't refer to Confucian philosophy as such.
 - Rather, to "traditional philosophy."
 - ✦ We focus only on 3 aspects especially relevant today:
 - **Family**
 - **Leadership**
 - **Education**

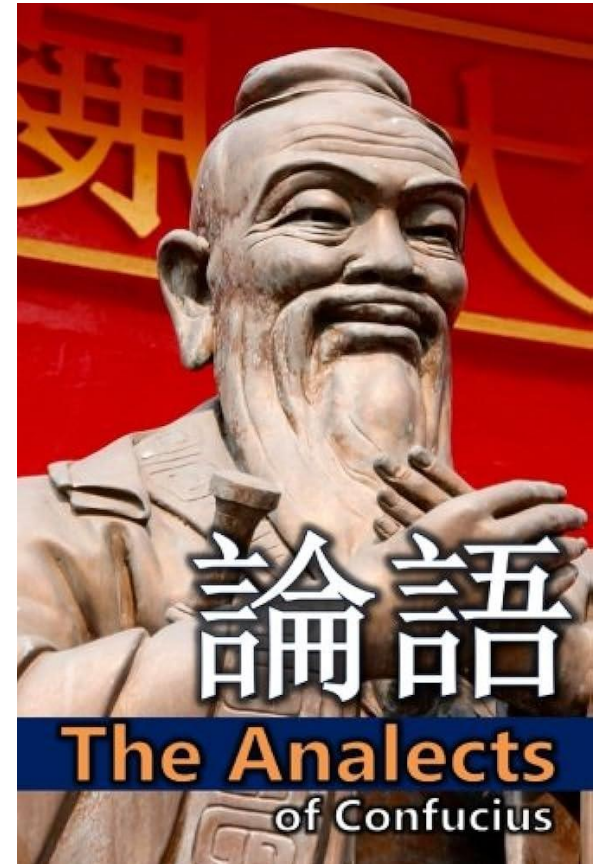


Confucius, 551-479 bce
In Chinese, *Kǒng fū zǐ* or *Kǒng zǐ*
(Master Kong)



Confucianism

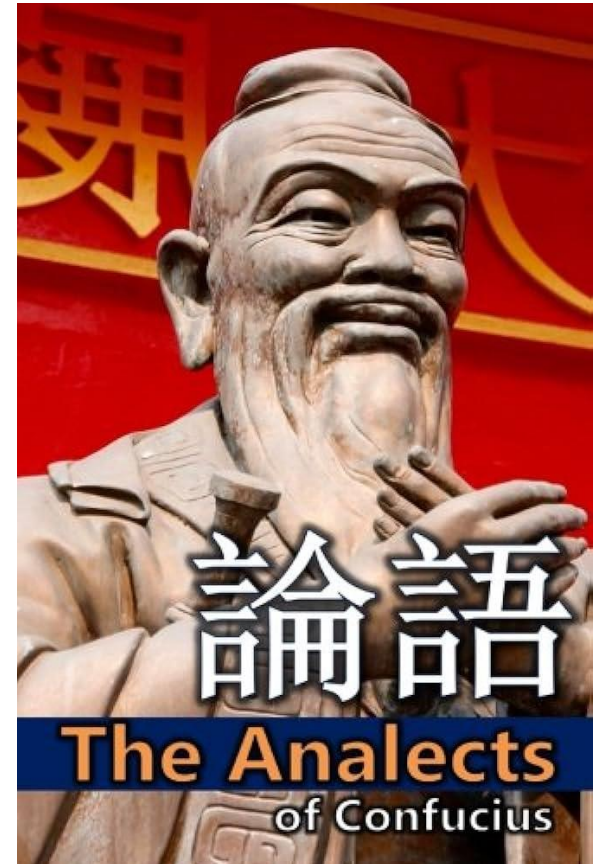
- ✦ Who was Confucius?
 - ❏ An itinerant teacher/advisor and would-be government official
 - ...with a strong interest in lifelong learning.
 - Initially held modest local positions, eventually as “minister of crime.”
 - Began his travels during mid-life crisis.
 - ❏ Like Socrates, wrote nothing
 - Disciples recorded his thoughts.





Confucianism

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 - Began his travels during mid-life crisis.
 - ❏ Like Socrates, wrote nothing
 - Disciples recorded his thoughts.
 - ❏ In the end, viewed himself as largely a failure in life.
 - Never held an important position.
 - Unable to make a significant contribution.

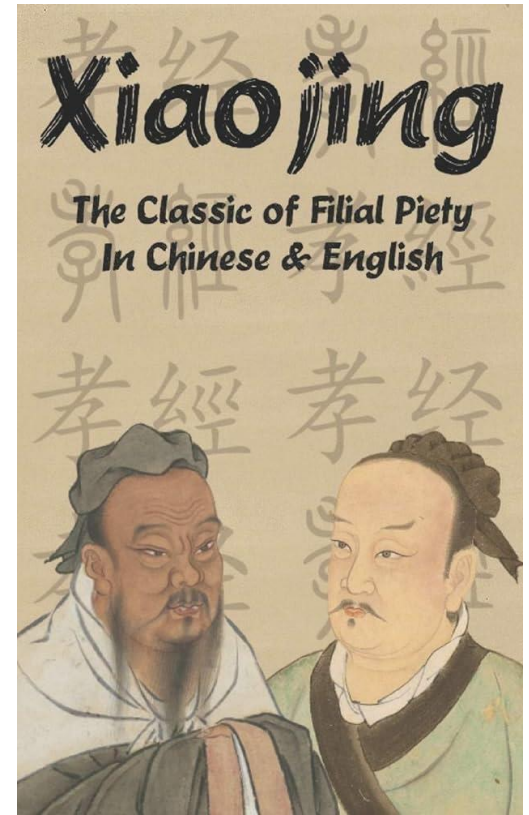




The Confucian family

☉ Filial piety

- ☒ Obligations to parents, grandparents, and ancestors.
 - Term derives from Cicero (*pietas*), where it implies a religious obligation to country (Rome) as well as family.



Based on dialog between Confucius and disciple Zēngzǐ.



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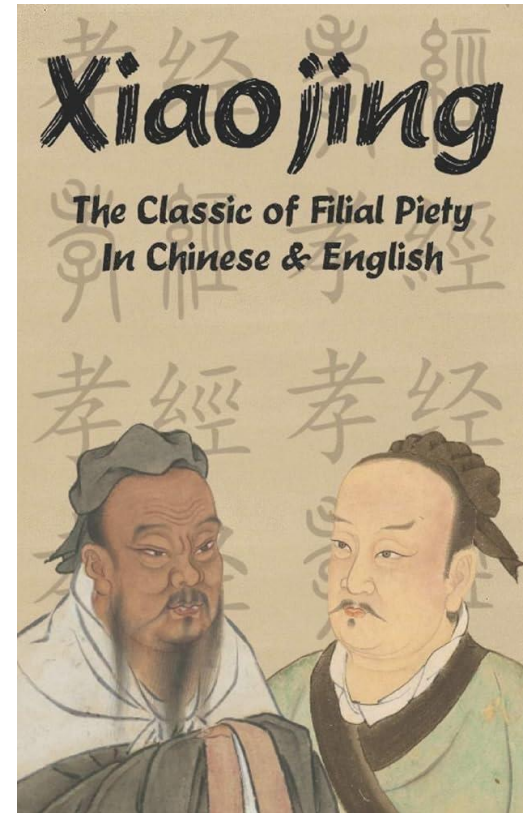
- Term derives from Cicero (*pietas*), where it implies a religious obligation to country (Rome) as well as family.

☉ A general principle for social order

- ☒ A natural hierarchy in society.

- Justified by **mutual obligation of care**.
- Elder relations, boss, ruler are viewed as paternalistic.
- The only **legitimate power relation** is one modeled on parent/child relationship.

- ☒ A **bedrock principle** of Chinese society.



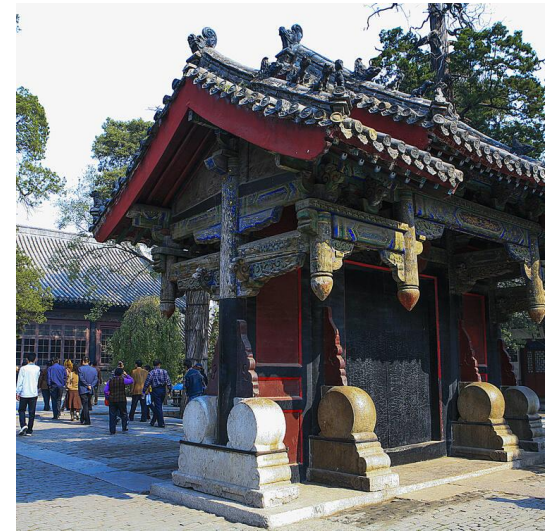
Based on dialog between Confucius and disciple Zēngzǐ.

Example: PhD student



Confucian leadership

- ✦ An effective leader must have **good character**
 - ✦ Confucius' role model: Duke of Zhou.
 - Duke of Zhou (*ZhōuGōng*, 11th c. bce) developed the concept of Mandate of Heaven.
 - Attributed fall of Shang dynasty to **moral failings** – injustice and decadence.



Kǒng family home in Qufu

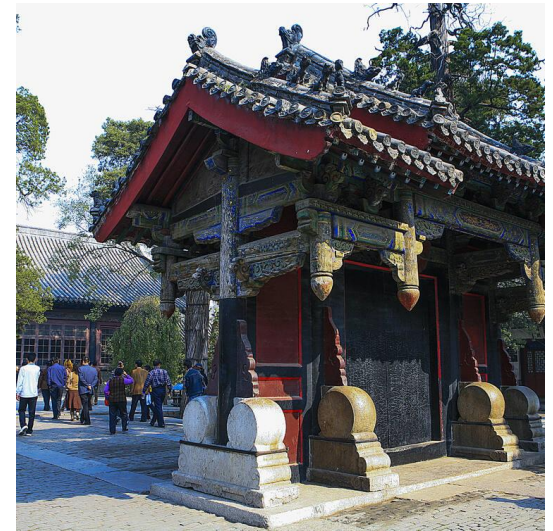


Duke of Zhou temple, Qufu



Confucian leadership

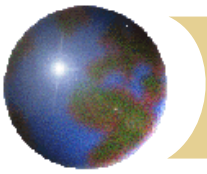
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 - Attributed fall of Shang dynasty to **moral failings** – injustice and decadence.
- ✦ Naive?
 - ✦ Maybe, but think about it...
 - A leader of strong character can earn **trust**.
 - Unscrupulous rulers often **crash and burn** eventually.



Kǒng family home in Qufu



Duke of Zhou temple, Qufu

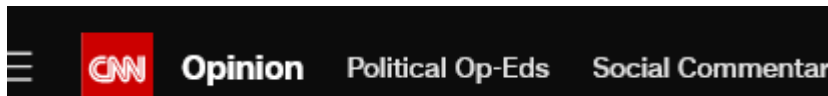


Confucian leadership

🌐 Recent example – **corrupt officials**

🗪 What's with the "disappearing" Chinese officials?

- A big story in Western media.
- Seen as evidence of something nefarious.



Opinion: It doesn't take an Agatha Christie detective to work out something's up in Xi's China

Opinion by Frida Ghitis

Updated 4:43 AM EDT, Fri September 22, 2023

- "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark [i.e., China]," according to Rahm Emmanuel, U.S. ambassador to Japan.



Confucian leadership



Defense Minister Li Shangfu

“Disappeared” in August after 6 months on the job.

Was under investigation for corruption.



Foreign Minister Qi Gang

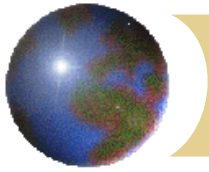
Former ambassador to U.S. Removed from office in July without explanation.

Alleged extramarital affair.



Rocket Force Commander Li Yuchao

Replaced July, along with lieutenants, following investigation of alleged corruption.



Confucian leadership

⊕ Recent example – **corrupt officials**

⊞ Officials often removed for corruption

- Xi Jinping, whatever his faults, is a career-long **corruption fighter**.
- Perhaps reflecting a traditional emphasis on good character in officials.



Confucian leadership

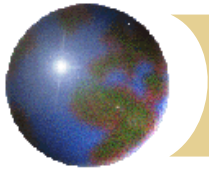
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❏ Why the lack of explanation?

- Transparency is **unimportant** in a **high-context** culture.
- Chinese public has **little interest** in personnel shuffles, as long as the government delivers.
- Just as we pay little attention to company executives, as long as they sell us a good product.



Confucian leadership

✦ Recent example – **corrupt officials**

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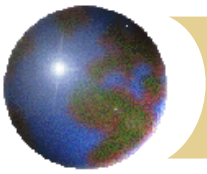
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- Chinese public has **little interest** in personnel shuffles, as long as the government delivers.
- Just as we pay little attention to company executives, as long as they sell us a good product.

❏ Xi may, of course, have political motives.

- But an unexplained “disappearance” need indicate nothing more than removal for corruption or incompetence.



Confucian education

✿ The foundation of character

❖ Virtue is **acquired** through **education**

- **Everyone can and should be educated.**
- Human beings are instinctively **altruistic**.
- But this trait must be **cultivated**.





Confucian education

✿ The foundation of character

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❖ A view reinforced by Confucian disciple Mencius (*Mèngzǐ*)

- Parable of the child in danger.
- *Mèng mǔ sān qiān* – Mencius' mother, three moves.





Confucian education

✿ The foundation of character

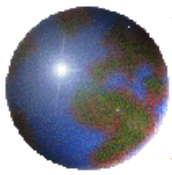
❏ ...in contrast to today's Western perspective

- It is questioned **whether ethics can be taught** at all, at an intellectual level – despite our Greek heritage.
- Human beings are seen as fundamentally **self-interested individuals** who must be **incentivized** to behave properly.

Doctrine of the “invisible hand” is highly popular...

...even though it is a gross distortion of Adam Smith's point in *Wealth of Nations*





Education

⊕ “No excuses” view of education

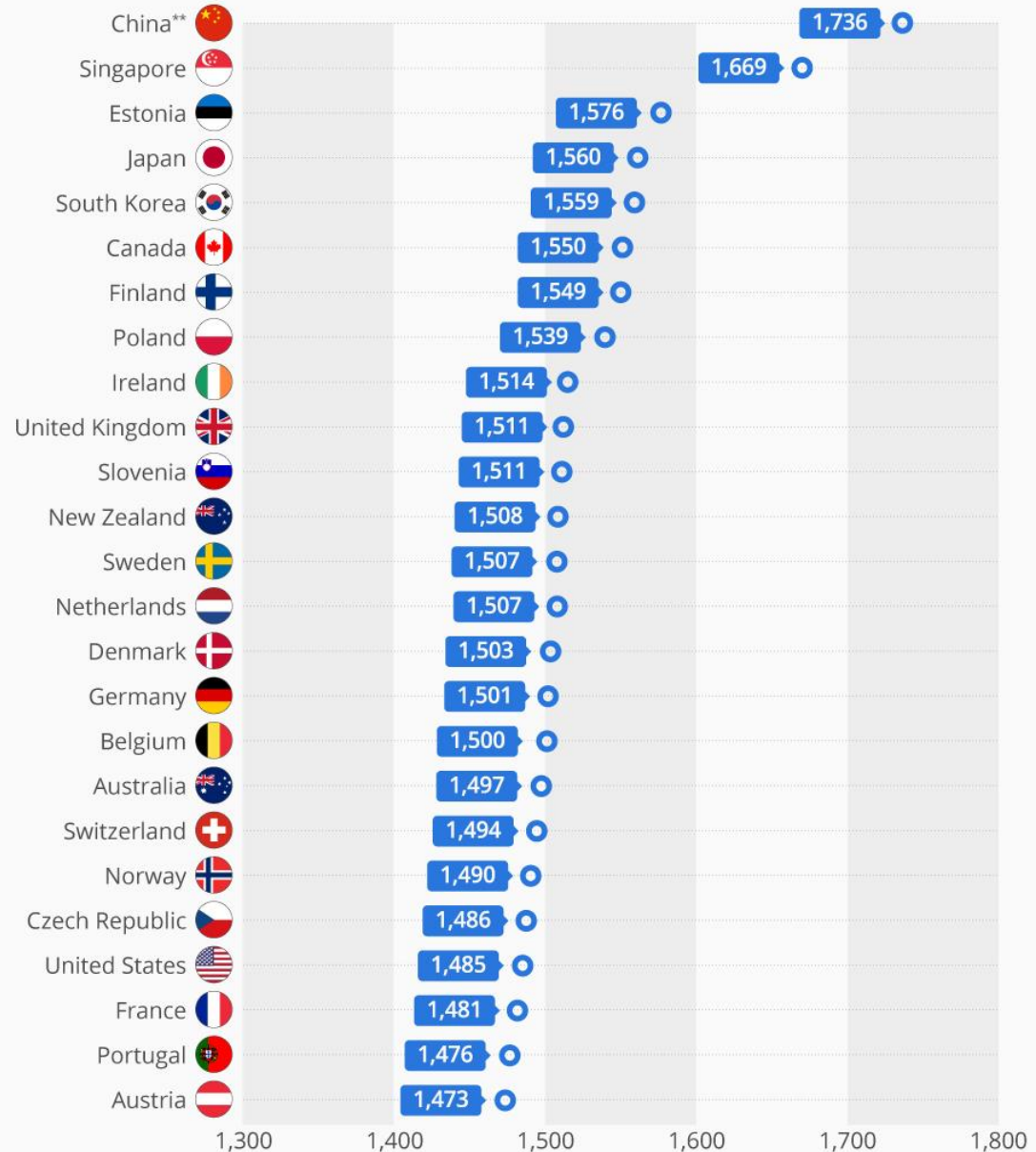
⊕ Everyone can and should learn.

- Regardless of “talent,” whatever that is.

China and Singapore have equally superior scores on the math portion of the test.

PISA 2018: The Top Rated Countries

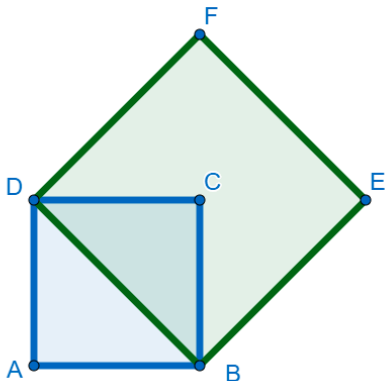
Sum of mean science, reading and mathematics scores from the OECD PISA Results 2018*





Confucian education

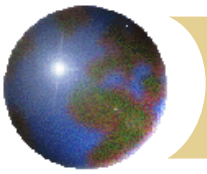
- ⊕ “No excuses” view of education
 - ⊞ In contrast to Western assumptions.
 - One can “lack talent” for math, etc.
 - **Genetically endowed talent** is honored and rewarded despite claimed emphasis on earned merit.
 - Concepts of **talent, genius, child prodigy** etc. have ancient roots in Indo-European doctrine of transmigration of souls.



In Plato's dialog *Meno*, an uneducated slave boy proves a special case of the Pythagorean theorem, supposedly showing that he acquired the knowledge in a previous life.



Young Mozart
at the piano

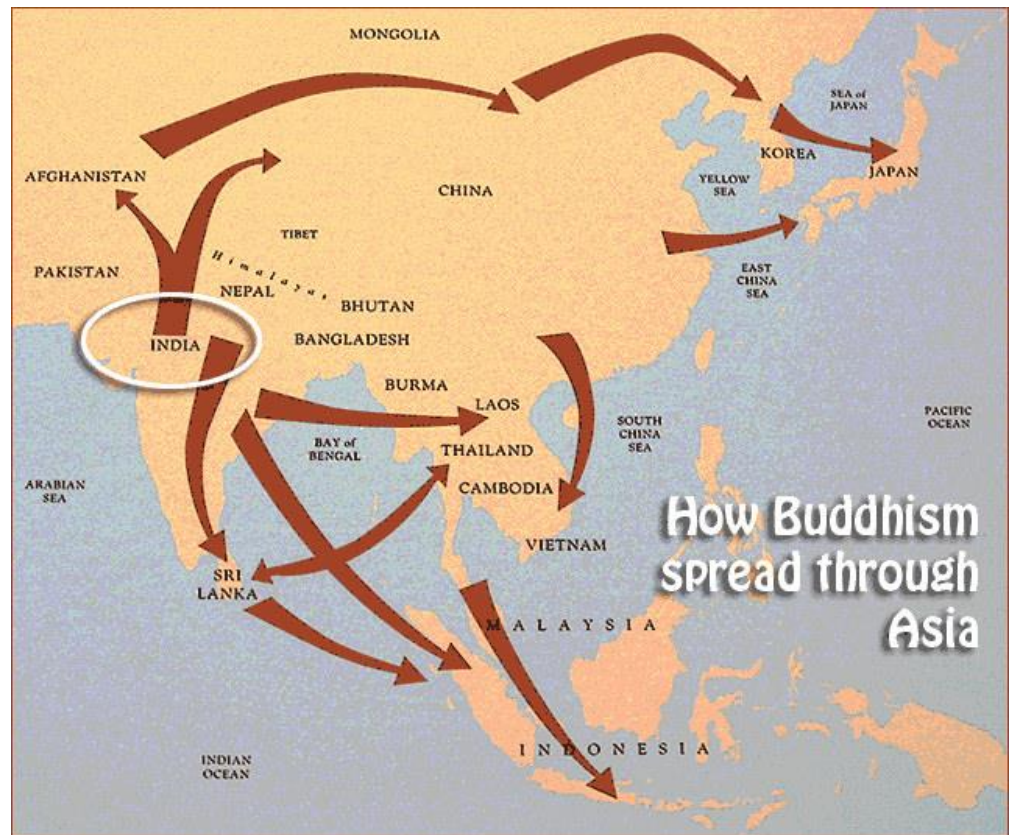


Buddhism

☉ An import from India/Nepal

☒ China developed a variety of Mahayana Buddhism

- “Pure Land” Buddhism especially popular historically.
- Buddhist monasteries tolerated by government, partly because they provided banking services.





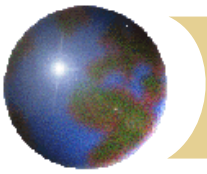
Buddhism

✿ An import from India/Nepal

- ✿ China developed a variety of Mahayana Buddhism
 - Tendency to revere Buddha statues as symbols of the faith and call on the Buddha for protection.



Laughing Buddha, popular in China



Buddhism

❁ An import from India/Nepal

❁ How many Chinese are Buddhists?

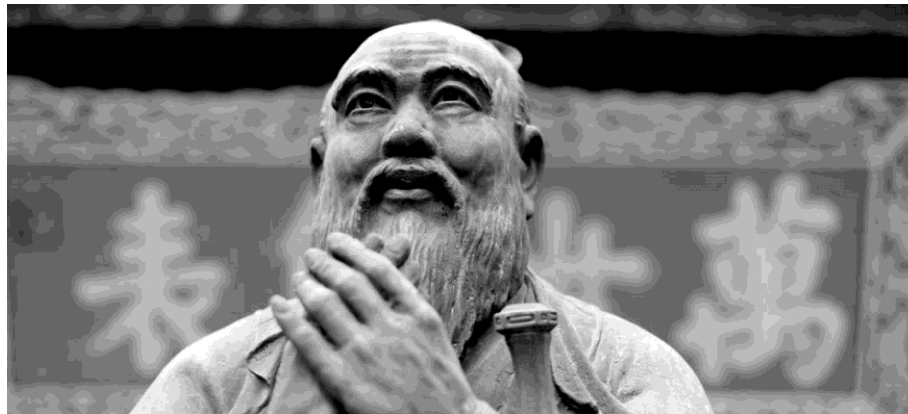
- A meaningless question.
- Chinese see no need to “buy into” or “convert to” an exclusive religion or philosophy.

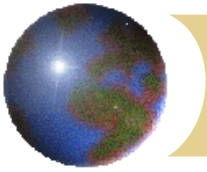




Confucian ethics

- Two vignettes involving **corruption** and **loyalty & contractual duty**.





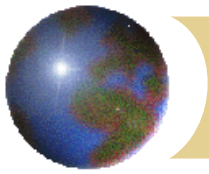
Corruption

✚ What is corruption?

✚ **Corruption corrupts.**

- It undermines the system.
- **Rule-based** and **relationship-based** systems are corrupted in different ways.





Corruption

What is corruption?

Corruption **corrupts**.

- It undermines the system.
- **Rule-based** and **relationship-based** systems are corrupted in different ways.

What corrupts?

Bribery is a major problem in relationship-based cultures.

- Because it is a tempting short-cut to building relationships.

Cheating is a major problem in rule-based cultures.

- Because of light supervision.
- As in 2008 financial crisis.

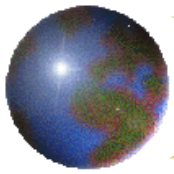




Corruption

- ✦ What is corrupt in one system may be acceptable in another.
 - ✦ For example, **cronyism** may be OK in a relationship-based culture.
 - Cronyism = taking care of your friends first.
 - ✦ But **cronyism** must be distinguished from **bribery**...

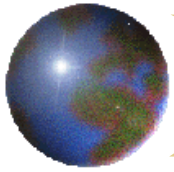




Corruption

- ✦ Cronyism vs bribery.
 - ✦ U.S. manager was posted in Kodak's Taiwan branch.
 - He met with a team representing a potential Taiwanese supplier.



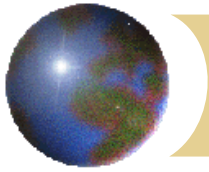


Corruption

✚ Cronyism vs bribery.

- ✚ U.S. manager was posted in Kodak's Taiwan branch.
 - He met with a team representing a potential Taiwanese supplier.
 - When the team left, he noticed that one of them **left his briefcase.**





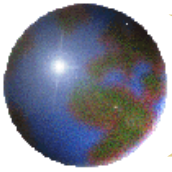
Corruption

✚ Cronyism vs bribery.

❏ U.S. manager was posted in Kodak's Taiwan branch.

- He met with a team representing a potential Taiwanese supplier.
- When the team left, he noticed that one of them **left his briefcase.**
- While looking for the owner's name, he found the case to be full of **cash.**



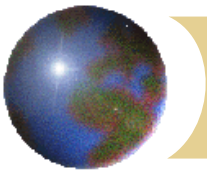


Corruption

✚ Cronyism vs bribery.

- ✚ **Kickbacks** (“commissions”) are common in some industries.
 - But they are corrupting nonetheless.
 - They are a form of **bribery**.
 - Why are they corrupting?





Corruption

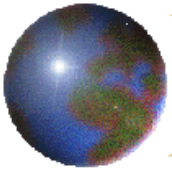
✿ Cronyism vs bribery.

✿ Chinese/Taiwanese business is often based on *guānxi*.

- Relationship of mutual obligation and mutual trust.
- Legal enforcement is unnecessary.
- Requires cultivation over a long period.
- **A legitimate form of cronyism.**

关系



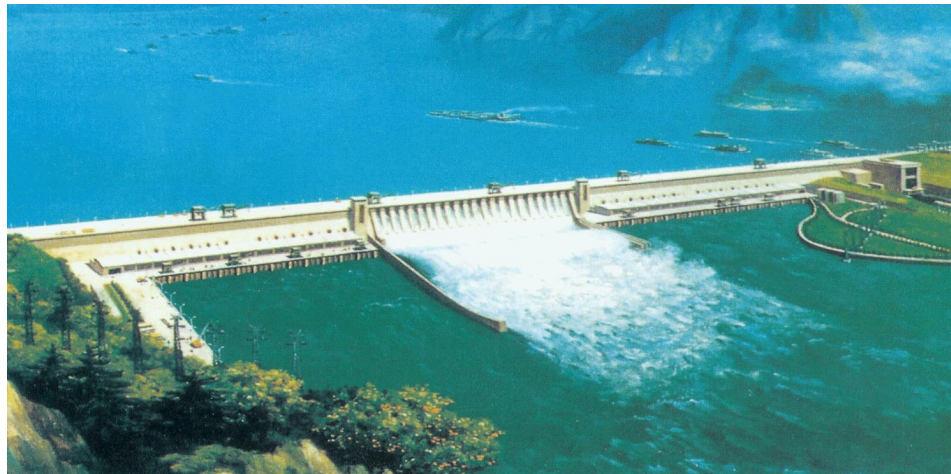


Corruption

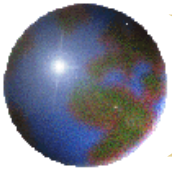
✚ Cronyism vs bribery.

✚ Bribery short-cuts the process of building *guānxi*.

- Relationship-based systems tend to slide into bribery.
- As rule-based systems can slide into cheating.
- Bribery/kickbacks do not provide the stable, long-term relationships required by a complex civilization.



Three Gorges Dam,
Yangtze River



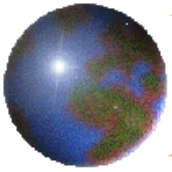
Corruption

✚ Cronyism vs bribery.

✚ What to do about the briefcase?

- The manager dispatched a trusted subordinate to return the briefcase to the owner.
- He sent a vaguely worded email to the owner's boss, stating that he was returning lost property... Otherwise, the boss might think the money was delivered.





Corruption

✚ Cronyism vs bribery.

✚ Lesson:

- **Responsible** cronyism is not corrupting in a **relationship-based** culture.
- Responsible = Deal with friends because **you trust them to deliver**, not **simply because they are friends**.
- This **removes conflict of interest**, because the company benefits as well as the cronies.





Loyalty & contractual duty

✦ Supply chain ethics

- ✦ Supply chains often stretch from a rule-based to a relationship-based culture.
 - Contractual specifications may not cross the **cultural divide**.



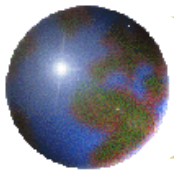


Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Mattel in China

- ✿ In 2007, Mattel discovered that many of its toys were coated with lead-based paint.
 - Lead additive tastes sweet but is toxic to children.
 - Mattel recalled about 1 million toys.
 - Toys were sourced through a supply chain from China.
 - What went wrong?



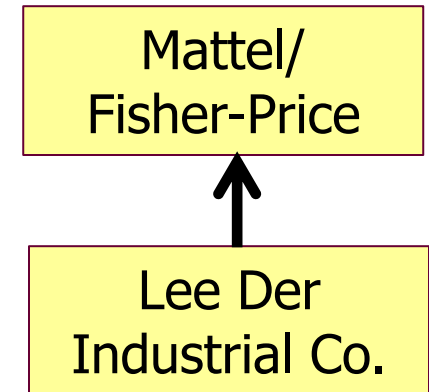


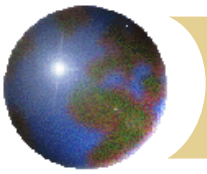
Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Mattel in China

✿ Fisher-Price sourced from Zhang Shuhong.

- Manager of Lee Der Industrial Company.
- Zhong was totally dedicated to his job.
- He even lived in a small room at the factory.

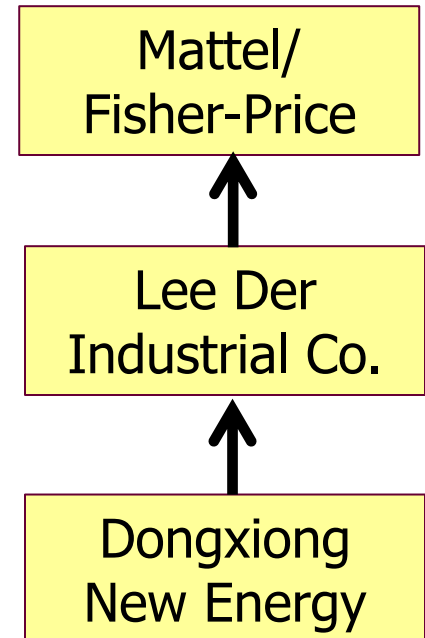




Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Mattel in China

- ✿ Fisher-Price sourced from Zhang Shuhong.
 - Zhang obtained paint from his **loyal *guānxi*** partner Liang Jiacheng at Dongxiong New Energy.



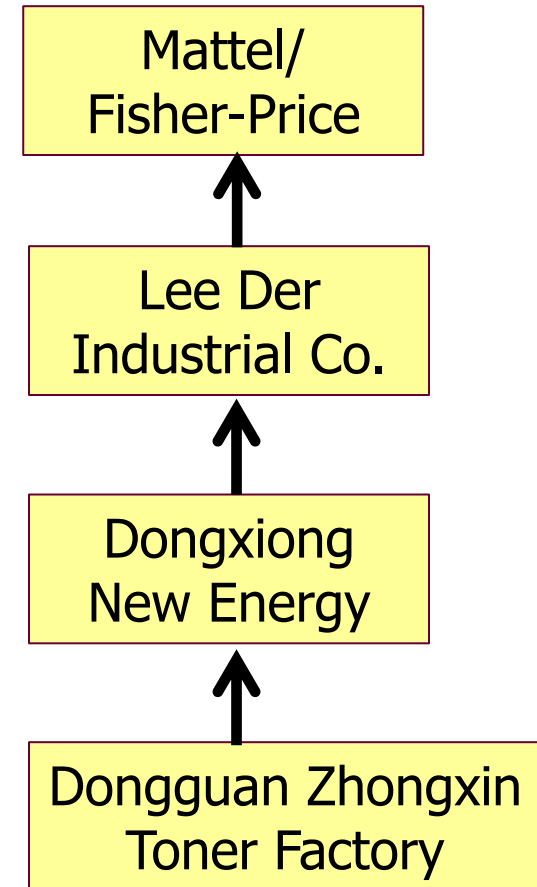


Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Mattel in China

✿ Fisher-Price sourced from Zhang Shuhong.

- Zhang obtained paint from his **loyal *guānxi*** partner Liang Jiacheng at Dongxiong New Energy.
- Liang was short of pigment and ordered it over the web from people **he didn't know**.

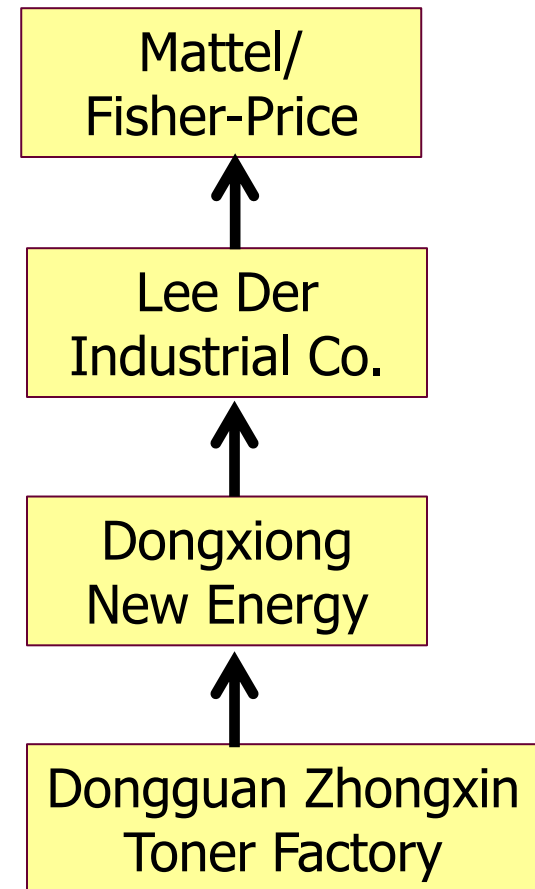




Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Mattel in China

- ✿ The supplier sent **lead-based** pigment
 - ...along with a **forged certificate**.



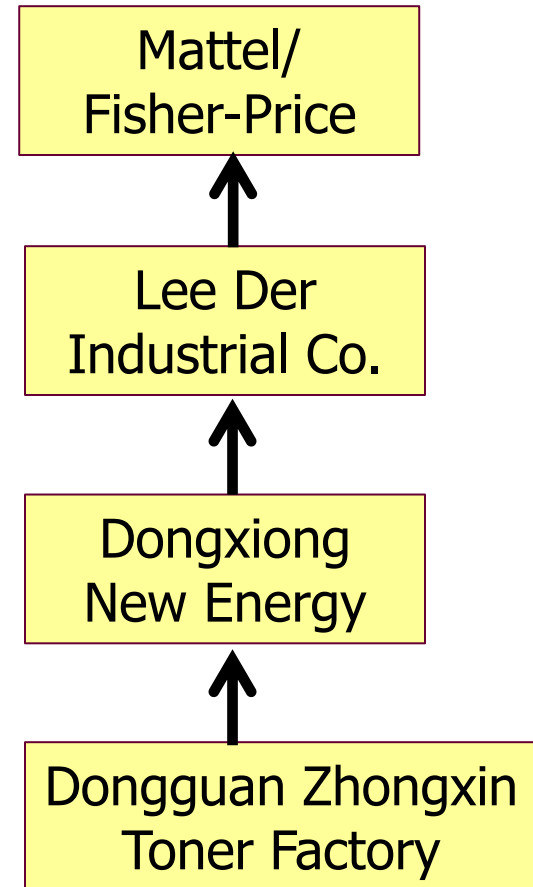


Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Mattel in China

✿ The supplier sent **lead-based** pigment

- ...along with a **forged certificate**.
- When Mattel discovered the problem, the Chinese government **revoked** Lee Der's export license.





Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Mattel in China

❏ The supplier sent **lead-based** pigment

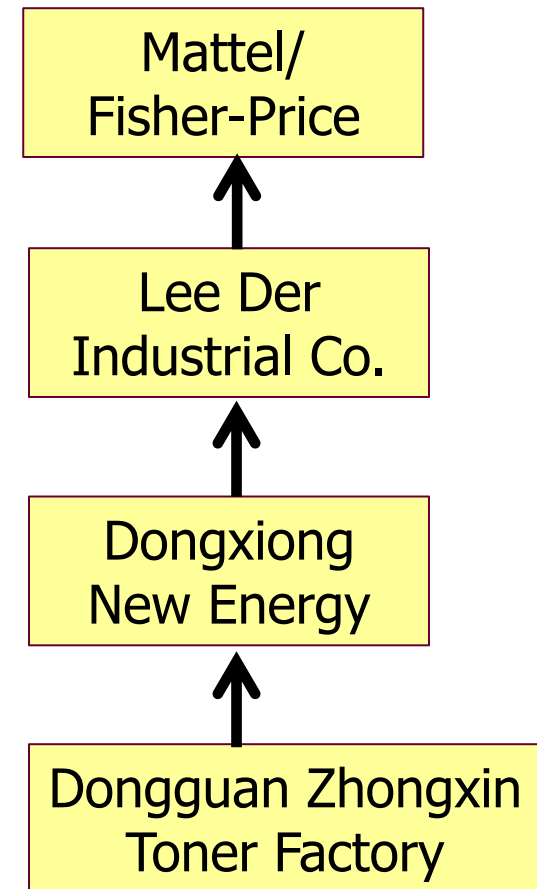
- ...along with a **forged certificate**.
- When Mattel discovered the problem, the Chinese government **revoked** Lee Der's export license.
- After apologizing to his workers, Zhang retreated into his factory bedroom and **hanged himself**.

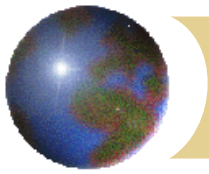


**Chinese Toy
Exec Commits
Suicide After
Recall**



China banned exports
from the company





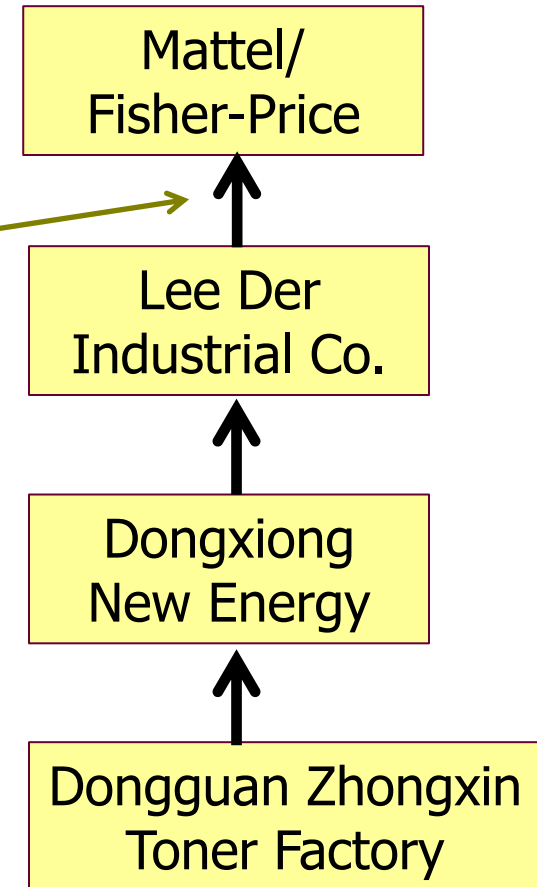
Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Mattel in China

✿ Weak link in the supply chain

Transition from contract-based to relationship-based business

- Zhang considered it sufficient to trust his supplier Liang.
- A Fisher-Price purchaser who had *guānxi* with Zhang could have learned that Zhang was not performing lead-free certification as required by the contract.



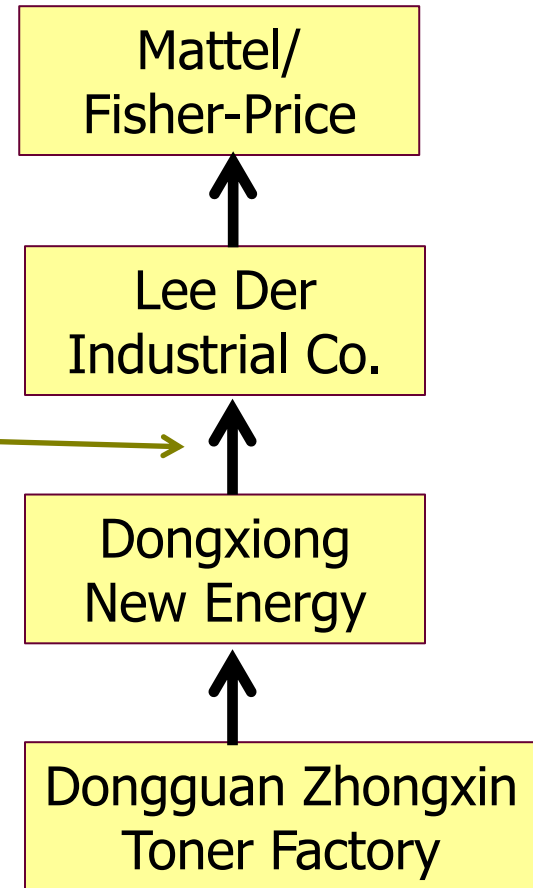


Loyalty & contractual duty

- ✪ Mattel in China
 - ▣ The second link was solid.

Guānxi

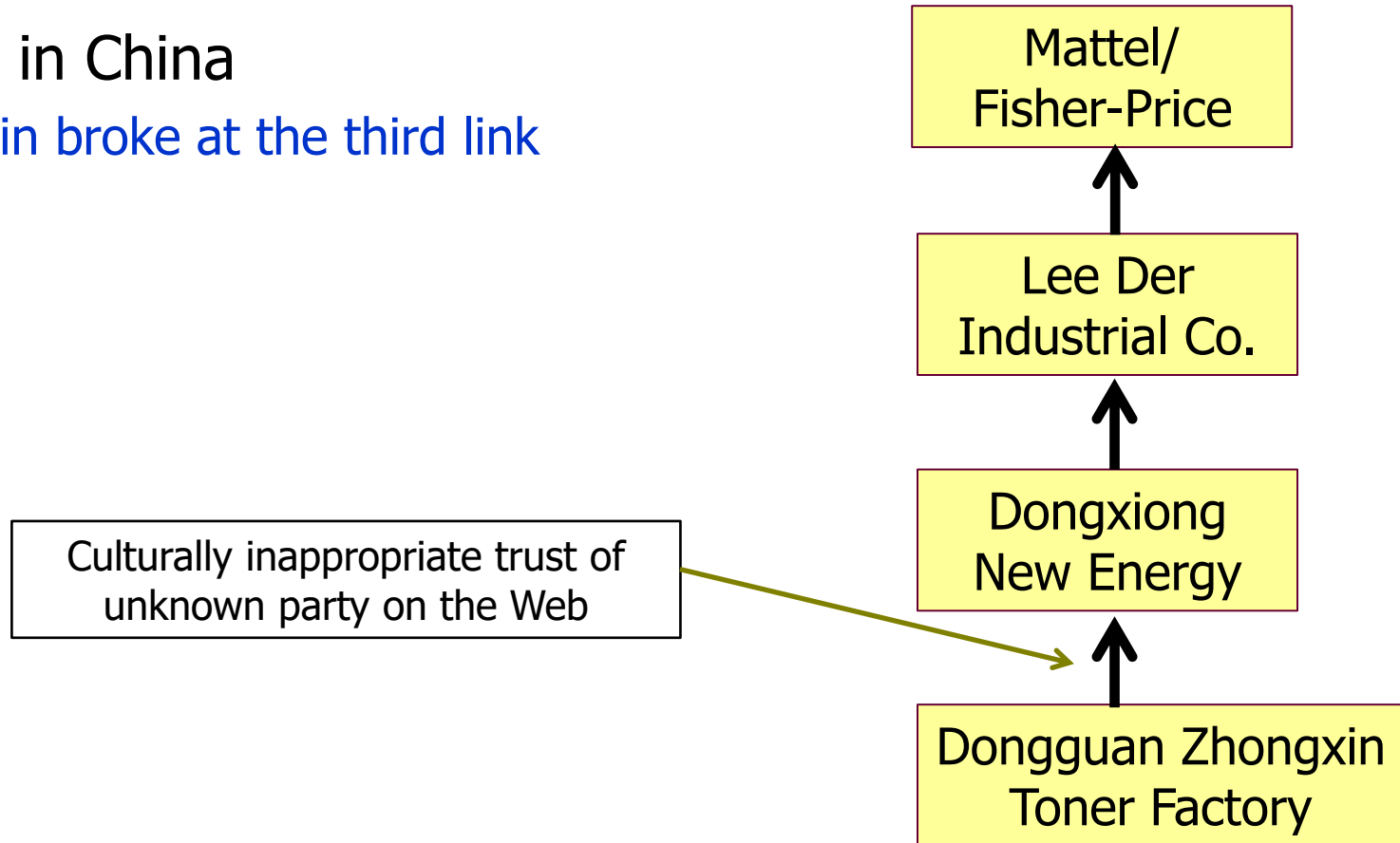
- Zhang's trust in Liang was culturally appropriate.





Loyalty & contractual duty

- ✪ Mattel in China
 - ▣ Chain broke at the third link

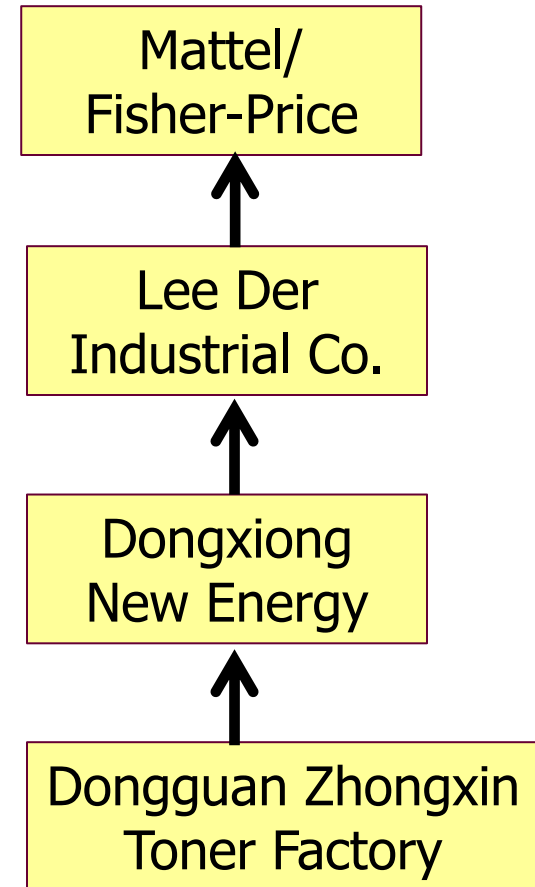




Loyalty & contractual duty

✚ Lessons

- ✚ In Western ethics, only contractual obligations are binding in business.
 - Zhang should have known this and observed contractual terms he thought were unnecessary.





Loyalty & contractual duty

✿ Lessons

- ✿ In Western ethics, only contractual obligations are binding in business.
 - Zhang should have known this and observed contractual terms he thought were unnecessary.

- ✿ In traditional Confucian ethics, business obligations are incurred through trust relationships.
 - Mattel should have known this and developed *guānxi* with Zhang.
 - Liang should have recognized this and obtained pigment from a trusted supplier.

