Ideas of ‘sovereignty as responsibility’ and ‘the responsibility to protect’ have become increasingly accepted by the society of states in recent years. The origins of these ideas are appropriately traced to earlier European concepts of popular resistance and humanitarian intervention. However, Europe is not unique in possessing a heritage of sovereign accountability. Almost two thousand years before sovereignty emerged in early modern Europe, philosophers in Ancient China developed remarkably similar concepts about the responsibilities of legitimate rule. Confucian scholars, in particular Mencius, argued that rulers were established by Heaven for the benefit of the people. The people, in turn, could rightfully hold their rulers to account. They had the right to banish a bad ruler and even to kill a tyrant. Moreover, a benevolent ruler was justified in waging ‘punitive war’ against the tyrannical ruler of another state, in order to punish him and to comfort the people. Recognition of this non-European heritage of sovereign accountability opens up new possibilities for dialogue between those who would promote present day concepts of ‘sovereignty as responsibility’ and those who perceive these concepts as merely Western and alien principles grounded in Western and alien values.

Luke Glanville is a research fellow in the Griffith Asia Institute and Centre for Governance and Public Policy, Griffith University. He recently submitted his PhD thesis at the University of Queensland which examines the historical development of the notion that sovereign states have a responsibility to protect their populations from grave violations of human rights and explores the implications of this history for present thinking about the responsibilities of sovereignty.