



Research article

Confucius' political thought and both macro and micro thinking way

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into Confucius' political thought as recorded in the Analects, emphasizing his approach to both macro and micro levels of governance. Confucius' teachings on politics, reflected in his dialogues with rulers and officials, advocate for governance rooted in virtue and propriety. By analyzing Confucius' responses to political inquiries from sovereigns and disciples, the study reveals the dual focus of his political philosophy: the macro perspective of state governance and the micro perspective of administrative practice. The core of Confucius' political thought is "benevolence," which he defines both individually and societally. Individually, it involves treating others with compassion and empathy, while societally, it aspires to the ideal of a harmonious society where everyone fulfills their roles with integrity. Despite historical limitations, Confucius' political thought provides valuable insights into the integration of ethical governance and social harmony.

Key words: Confucius; Analects; Virtue

As one of the most important classical works in traditional Chinese culture, *the Analects of Confucius* records the words and deeds of Confucius and his disciples. The book contains 20 chapters and 509 segments, covering Confucius' thoughts on politics, military affairs, culture, education, philosophy and so on. Among these issues, one of the most important is the political thought of Confucius. What's more, in this work, it also reflects Confucius as a great philosopher to pay attention to both macro and micro thinking way.

The "political inquiry" in *the Analects of Confucius* embodies his political thought and wisdom of answering questions. The word "Zheng", which means politics, appears 42 times directly in 30 articles, accounting for 5.9% of the total. The words "wen zheng", which means inquiring politics, appeared 9 times directly, which can be said to directly reflect Confucius's political thought of virtue and propriety, benevolent government and loving the people. When people with different identities and personalities asked about politics, Confucius would give different answers, which directly reflected Confucius' wisdom of answering questions by getting to the point and teaching students according to their aptitude.

There were two main types of people who came to inquire about politics: one was the sovereign, or the sovereign of a country, or a local official; the other is the disciple of Confucius, doing some big or small

official positions. When the former came, Confucius answered the question from the macro perspective of how to govern the state, and the answer pointed to the rule of propriety and virtue. While when the latter came, Confucius answered the question from the micro perspective of how to administer the government, and the common feature of the answer was benevolent government.

In *the Analects of Confucius*, there are four quotations of the king coming to inquire about politics, which are Confucius' answers to the questions of Duke Jing of Qi, Duke Ye and Ji Kangzi (Ji Kangzi was the prime minister of Lu, but he had become the actual ruler, so he was counted as one of the Kings). When answering the question of the "monarch", Confucius emphasized the virtues of the rulers and the importance of the rule of etiquette from a macro perspective and required the "monarch" to govern the country by virtue and etiquette.

When the Duke of Jing of Qi came to ask him about politics, Confucius answered him with "Let the prince be a prince, and the public servant be a public servant. Let the father be a father, and let the son be a son". At that time, the social unrest, ritual and hierarchy were seriously threatened and destroyed, regicide and father killing often happened. By answering him in this way, Confucius was telling him that the first thing to do in governing a country was to follow the ritual system, in which people of different ranks and generations were assigned their respective

duties and positions. It should be added that He Yan's quotes Kong Anguo as saying, "At that time, Chen Heng was in harmony, the king was not the king, the minister was not the minister, the father was not the father, the son was not the son, so answer him like this."¹ Jing Gong had many sons, but he did not make a crown prince. Between kings and ministers, fathers and sons all lost their order, so the master Confucius told them to do so." It can be seen that the political problems of Qi at this time were largely attributed to the misadministration of Duke Jing of Qi. Duke Jing of Qi favored his youngest son She and ousted his eldest son Yangsheng. Later, Yangsheng killed his younger brother and made the crown prince because of Chen Xizi's help. From then on, the state of Qi was controlled by Chen Xizi. Duke Jing of Qi lost his father's way, which led to incest, and finally ended up changing the family of the king and the minister. Thus, it can be seen that Confucius' words of " Let the prince be a prince, and the public servant be a public servant. Let the father be a father, and let the son be a son " to the Duke of Qi hit the nail on the head, directly hitting the pain point of the Duke of Qi.

Ji Kangzi asked politics in two ways. The first answer Confucius gave to him was "If you yourself, sir, are in order, who will dare to be disorderly?", which was intended to enlighten Ji Kangzi to be upright in

¹ All quotations and translations of *the Analects of Confucius* in this paper are from [the Spring and Autumn] Kong Qiu, Chen Dian. *The Analects of Confucius* [M]. Jiangxi: Jiangxi People's Publishing House, 2016. and Gu Hongming, Wang Jingtao. *The Analects of Confucius (Chinese/English Commentary)* [M]. The first edition. Zhonghua Book Company, 2017.

order to govern the country well. In fact, Confucius also took this opportunity to remind Ji Kangzi, to respect the "courtesy", to restrain their own selfish desires, to change their own politics, do not respect the "courtesy" of the situation. It was a pity that Ji Kangzi could not follow Confucius' advice because of his own selfish desires. "Zheng" here in the context of that time refers to that the political leaders should follow the rites of Zhou, do their part, do not exceed the rules, and achieve the rule of etiquette. The other answer is the famous "wind and grass thinning", which Confucius also explained the problem of upper and lower effects. When Ji Kangzi wanted to govern the country by killing the unenlightened, Confucius used the analogy of "the wind on the grass" to talk about the effect of the upper and the lower and opposed the killing of the people and advocated the rule of virtue. The king needs to have benevolence, do good deeds to the good, people will not make trouble, the country can naturally be governed well. It should be added that the back story of Ji Kangzi. He Yan quoted Zheng Xuan as saying, "Kang Zi, The minister of the State of Lu, the commander of all his ministers. " It can be seen that Ji Kangzi did not have the name of a monarch but acted as a monarch. He was the official of the State of Lu at that time and was the actual owner of power. In *the Analects of Confucius*, the image of Ji was not only an inquisitor, but also an unauthorized person: shortly after Ji Ping drove out Duke Zhao of Lu, Confucius left Lu, and in the state of

Qi, he told Duke Jing of Qi about " Let the prince be a prince, and the public servant be a public servant. Let the father be a father, and let the son be a son ", which showed that Confucius was not satisfied with Ji Ping's action. Ji Huan uses eight Yi dancing in court, Confucius said, "Can endure also, which cannot endure also." When Ji Kangzi visited Mount Tai, Confucius said, "Alas! Did you say that Mount Tai is not as free as a forest?" It can be seen that Ji's trespass and Confucius's dissatisfaction. When Ji Kangzi came to ask about politics, he hit the nail on the head and said, "If you yourself, sir, are in order, who will dare to be disorderly?" Points out the deficiency of Ji Kangzi: not good enough, not kind enough. It not only pointed out the way to govern the country to Ji Kangzi, but also hit the pain point and demanded Ji Kangzi to abide by the etiquette and morality.

When Lord Ye asked Confucius about the affairs of state, Confucius replied, "When there is good government in a country the people at home are happy, and the people in other countries will come. " This is also recorded in the Confucius Family Language: "The upper relatives also, like brothers in the heart; The next close also, like a young son to a loving mother. In this way, the order is followed, the deeds are carried out, the people accept its virtues, the near one is convinced, the far one is attached, and the government is also." Lord Ye should take good care of the people and rule the country by virtue. Only in this way can he achieve the effect

of "those who are near will be happy and those who are far away will come. "

Through the dialogue of "inquiring about the government", we can see that Confucius' requirement for the government of the monarch is to guide the politics by virtue and propriety, which reflects Confucius' political thought of governing the country by virtue and governing the country by propriety.

In *the Analects of Confucius*, there are five quotations of officials' questions about government. They are Confucius' answers to the questions of Zi Zhang, Zi Lu, Zi Gong, Zhong Gong, and Zi Xia. Most of the Confucius' answers were from the micro perspective of how to concretely administer government.

When answering the questions of Zi Zhang and Zi Xia, Confucius mentioned "tireless". It can be seen that the basic advice of Confucius for his disciples to be officials was to be diligent in government. The precondition of diligent administration is to "love the people" and be willing to pay for the people. For ministers, "tireless" is "diligent" and "loyalty" is closely linked together, "loyalty" to rely on "tireless" is "diligent" to implement, only have "loyalty" without "diligent" loyalty is bound to be weak. Diligent administration and loving the people are the most direct requirements of benevolent governance. In the face of Zi Zhang's "political inquiry", Confucius paid great attention to the guidance

of administrative attitude. Zi Zhang was one of the disciples of Confucius who actively took up official positions. Faced with the possibility of becoming an official disciple in the future, Confucius warned Zi Zhang not to be tired in the administrative process, but to act actively and administer with his own loyalty and integrity.

Zi Lu was a straight, courageous and martial officer. He served as the governor of Wei. During his term in office, he excavated canals, saved the poor, and reigned extensively. The Cheng brothers of the Song Dynasty said, "Zi Lu asked about politics, and Confucius told him so. And he asked more, then Confucius said 'tireless' just. Confucius didn't say anything more, in order to make his deep thinking."² It can be seen that Confucius' heuristic teaching of Zi Lu, guided by the situation, left room for Zi Lu to digest and understand. Followed the teachings of Confucius, Zi Lu, can indeed implement the benevolent government, diligent government and love the people.

When Zi Gong asked about politics, Confucius emphasized the characters of " sufficient" and " trustworthy". When Chu Hsi explained this paragraph, he said: "Fill the granaries and arms, and educate the people, and they will trust me and not betray me. Even if you're fed but you have no credit, you have no army. People will die if they don't have food, and then death is inevitable. Without honesty, then even if alive

² [Song] Chu Hsi. *Collection of Analects* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2015.

cannot stand on its own, it is better to die. So, I'd rather die than betraying the people, so the people would rather die than betray me."³ "sufficient food" and "sufficient soldiers", two livelihood issues related to the basic life safety of the people, must be solved first in the administrative process. But more importantly, to win the trust of the people, rather than die than break the trust of the people. To do this, it is necessary that the administrator must impose benevolent administration and take care of the people. The Cheng brothers of the Song Dynasty said, " The disciples of Confucius were inquisitive and liked to ask questions to the end, but only Zi Gong could ask such questions "⁴ Zi Gong was not only a proud student of Confucius and an outstanding representative of Confucian scholars, but also good at business and was the richest among Confucius' disciples. He is good at eloquence, and has the ability to do economic work, the successful, served as the prime minister of the state of Lu, the state of Wei, Sima Qian spoke highly of him.

Zhong Gong served as the chief of the Ji family retainers. When he asked Confucius about politics, Confucius taught him that the purpose of appointing a good man was to put the right man in the right position. This kind of meritocracy is the foundation of benevolent governance. Zhong Gong was indeed the ability required for his position and was in line with his position.

³ [Song] Chu Hsi. *Collection of Analects* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2015.

⁴ Same as above.

When answering Zi Xia's questions about politics, Confucius instructed him to "Do not be in a hurry to get things done. Do not consider petty advantages. If you are in a hurry to get things done, things will not be done thoroughly and well. If you consider petty advantages, you will never accomplish great things. ", in order to inspire Zi Xia to take a long-term view and not to be eager for quick success. Zi Xia is required to do things step by step, work out detailed plans and steps, grasp the rhythm, step by step to the end, do not ignore the objective conditions, blindly insist on speed. As a local official, Confucius taught Zi Xia to broaden his horizons. Haste makes waste, which is more appropriate. Although this cannot directly reflect Confucius' political thought of benevolent government and loving the people, it also reflects Confucius' objective requirements for the administrators, expecting them to act according to the rules, truly benefit the people and implement benevolent government.

It should be noted that the rule of the king and the administration of the court officials is not separated. Only the rulers (the kings) and the administrators (the court officials) respect the moral and ritual rules, implement the benevolent administration and care for the people, which is the ideal political view of Confucius.

From the above, we can see that the core of Confucius' political

thought is "benevolence", then what is "benevolence"? Confucius gave the answer in terms of the individual and the society.

In the micro personal perspective, generally speaking, the so-called "benevolence" is to love others with their own love, that is, everyone should learn to treat others like themselves, infer from their own experience that others will have similar feelings, so as to give their love to others. Fan Chi asked about benevolence: "What does a moral life consist in? " "The moral life of a man! " answered Confucius, "consists in loving men. "; Zhong Gong asked about benevolence, Confucius said, "Whatsoever things you do not wish that others should do unto you, do not do unto them. " ; In addition, Zi Gong once said to Confucius: "If there is a man who carries out extensively good works for the welfare of the people and is really able to benefit the multitude, what would you say of such a man: could he be called a moral character? " "Why call him only a moral character! " answered Confucius. "If one must call such a man by a name, one would call him a holy or sainted man. For, judged by the works of which you speak, even the ancient Emperors Yao and Shun felt their shortcomings. " [The Abraham and Isaac in patriarchal times of Chinese history. Mencius, making use of these names to illustrate his teaching, says: "A man rises early every morning and works persistently all day long, for what? For righteousness; then he is a son of Abraham (Shun). Another man also rises early every morning and works

persistently all day long, for what? For gain, then he is a son of Barabbas the Robber. "] Visible, in one ' s heart with love to love others "benevolence", is an important part of the implicit logic, the logic is the other to Confucius thought derived from the "benevolence" is one of the important paths, that is, a person to do "benevolence", the first to have "the heart of love" heart, and then you can do it "love others" behavior. There is a logical sequence of realizing "benevolence" from near to far, from first to last, that is, only one person has subjective benevolence first, and then tries his best to spread this benevolence in the order of near to far, forming benevolence, and finally realizing the sage's act of giving to the people and benefiting the people. This development mode of "benevolence", from near to far, from subjective to objective, from micro to macro, is the embodiment of Confucius' own thinking mode in understanding and explaining things. At the same time, this thinking mode has greatly influenced the emergence and development of Confucius' other thoughts.

In the macro level of social governance, "benevolence" is reflected in his ideal of "great harmony" society. The Book of Rites writes: " When the road was implemented in the world, we took the world as our common property and selected the virtuous and capable people. People all emphasize honesty and cultivate a harmonious atmosphere. So, people don't just treat their parents as parents and their children as children, so

that the elderly can live out their days, the adults can contribute to society, and the young can grow up smoothly. So that the old and wifeless, the old and husbandless, the young and fatherless, the old and childless, and the disabled can all be supported. Men have a position; women have a destination. For goods, people hate the act of throwing it on the ground, but do not necessarily want to keep it. People are willing to do their best for the public, not for their own interests. Therefore, no evil will take place, no theft, no rebellion, no harm will be done, and no house will have to close its doors. This is the ideal great harmony society. "⁵ Confucius from the material and spiritual two aspects to explain how to realize such a goal. When Confucius on his travels was on one occasion entering a certain State in company with a disciple who was driving the carriage for him, he remarked, "What a large population is here! " "With such a large population! " asked the disciple, "what should be done? " "Enrich them!" answered Confucius. "And after that? " asked the disciple. "Educate them!" replied Confucius.

In a word, Confucius thought of benevolent government is the further perfection and play of the political and ethical thought which has been gradually formed and matured since the Western Zhou Dynasty in ancient China. Although some ideas inevitably have historical limitations, it is worth our dialectical study today. As individuals, we should learn to

⁵ [Song] Chen Ho. *The Book of Rites* [M]. The First edition. Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House Co. LTD., 2016.

push people's "benevolence", as social managers, should implement the "benevolence" policy. Of course, Confucius also inspired us to think more from the macro and micro levels in our daily life.

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