

## Political Thought of Some Ancient Chinese Philosophers

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### Abstract

This research paper is an attempt to solve the problem "why some ancient Chinese philosophers stress "ethics" on political thought"<sup>3</sup>. The research finding is that ancient Chinese philosophers showed ethical attitude with good intentions for the betterment of the lives of the people.<sup>4</sup> The attainment of some agreements will lead to mutual understanding with contemporary world.<sup>5</sup> In this research paper the descriptive method and evaluative method are used.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this paper is to present the political view of some ancient Chinese philosophers and to show how it is still relevant to contemporary world.

Key words: ancient Chinese philosophers, ethics, political thought

### INTRODUCTION

Chinese civilization came into existence aeons ago. According to the findings of archaeologists, it flourished in the same era as Mesopotamian civilization. China is a country with a vast area of land and is heavily populated, and it stayed isolated from the outside world. In those days, the Chinese people preferred to live their own way of life, with freedom of thought and local independence. As a result, many states, each ruled by an individual ruler, emerged. However, no monarchy existed to unify the segregated states.

The ancient Chinese society exercised a matriarchal system. However, according to their tradition, each clan practiced ancestor veneration. It means a virtue of honoring or paying respect to one's parents, elders and ancestors. The economy of the ancient Chinese, like other ancient societies, based on farming and handicraft industries. However, something remarkable about the economic life was that in 1122 B.C., in the ruling period of Wu Wang who founded the Zhou Dynasty, feudalism established, as areas of land were allocated to certain individuals.

China was the country where classic feudalism flourished. As feudal lords were aristocrats who owned large estates, the social classes of the rich and the poor had a big difference in nature. The ancient scholars and the philosophers emphasized on ethics, religion and Chinese culture as well as politics.

The word politics comes from the Greek word "*Politikos*". The Greek word "*polis*" means the City-State. By means of *Greek language, the management of city-state's affairs, authority as well as techniques are called politikos*. Politics means the participation in the affairs of the state, its guidance, determination of the forms, aims and the content of the activity of the state. Politics includes problems of the state structure, the management of the country, leadership of classes, problem of party struggle, etc. The fundamental interests of classes and the relations between the classes are reflected in politics. Politics also express the relations between nations and states.

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<sup>3</sup> Research Problem

<sup>4</sup> Research Finding

<sup>5</sup> Contribution

<sup>6</sup> Research Method

Politics is the study or practice of the distribution of power and resources within a given community as well as the interrelationships between communities. It includes problems of the state structure, the management of the country, leadership of classes and problems of party struggle. The term of politics is the activities that perform the cause of measures and limitations of individual life and social life.

### **Political Thought of Confucius**

Of the ancient Chinese philosophers, the world's most famous is Confucius. He was born in 551 B.C., in the State of Lu. He was called Kung Fu Tzu or Master Kung. His family name was Kung and his given name was Chiu. Confucius taught his disciples to be all-round scholars with the intention that they would serve the country. In this way, he educated the young on politics, social welfare and ethics.

Confucius' philosophy is humanistic social philosophy. The term '*ren*' or human-heartedness is the very center of Confucius' philosophy. Confucius stressed human relationships – every man in his proper place and with his proper responsibilities and duties. The Confucian doctrine is that if every man knows his duty and acts according to his duty, social order will be secured.

To acquire a happy life, Confucius lectured not only the people on socializing but also the rulers on relationship with the people. Instability within the country meant the king and the ministers were not treating the people in a rightful manner. Confucius also disclosed three basic requirements of state. They are its sovereignty be safeguarded by adequate military strength, its welfare by sufficient food and its government by the confidence of the people.

In politics, Confucius subscribed the concept of father like government, in which the ruler should reign his people with benevolence as a patriarch of his family. The son had to pay respect to the father and so did the wife to her husband. Neither the wife nor the children had the chance to go against the head of the family. Also, there was a sense of precedence among brothers. Moreover, the family was under the influence of the father as the people of a unified country by a ruler were. The ruler was considered the divine son of God and had been given the right to rule in accordance with the mandate given by Heaven. Confucius said that the government must strive for the betterment of the people and that the government must organize the most qualified men in the country. They were qualified, regardless of birth, wealth or position. It was just an issue of character and knowledge. For that reason, it is essential to educate the people on a large scale.

According to Confucius, a ruler had nine fundamental duties:

- To cultivate his personal conduct.
- To honor men of worth.
- To cherish for his kinsmen.
- To show respect to great ministers.
- To have an interest in the welfare of all officials.
- To take paternal care of the common people.
- To promote all useful crafts.
- To be hospitable to strangers.
- To be friendly to neighboring princes.

It was of exclusive importance for a ruler to discipline his own behavior so that he could establish a precise example of ethics for the officials as well as the people. Accordingly, the political philosophy of Confucius was based on the principles of moral virtues and folk tradition.

Being the person who strived to revive the unruly country into an orderly and ethical state, Confucius suggested that the government should be administered by the most qualified men. They were qualified, regardless of birth, wealth or position. Confucius opposed the tradition of a person becoming a ruler conferred by inheritance. He also stood up against the custom which stated that only an aristocrat could become a nobleman. Confucius said that to be a nobleman one needed only character and knowledge, without regard to their origin. Thus, he was the one who challenged the traditional beliefs.

According to Confucius's political view, the government should be directed at carrying out the interest and delight for the entire country. This could be accomplished only when the government was managed by the most qualified men in the country. Qualification is just an issue of personality and intelligence. Moreover, respect must be given to the hereditary ruler. As the son must not disregard the father, the people must not go against the ruler. As a result, the principles of Confucius were not solely for the welfare of the people but for the ethical governance of the ruling class.

### **Political Thought of Mencius**

Of all disciples of Confucius, the most famous philosopher was Mencius, also known as Meng Tzu. He emerged as a philosopher, hundred years after the death of Confucius. He was born in Tsou state, south of the present Shantung province, eastern China.

Mencius, like Confucius considered man as a social being. Man cannot exist all alone. Within a society, he has to live by some basic rules of social relationships. As with all Confucianists, Mencius acknowledged five fundamental kinds of relationship.

Father and son should love each other. Ruler and subject should be just to each other. Husband and wife should distinguish their respective spheres. Elder and younger brothers should have a sense of mutual precedence. And between friends there should be good faith.<sup>1</sup>

The reality of correlation of human and the ethical precepts based on this is what separates men from animals. The government and society have their basis in the occurrence of these human correlations. Men can fully progress these correlations only within government and society. The government is an ethical organization and the head of the government should be a leader with ethics. Thus, as Confucius, Mencius considered that only a sage can be a true monarch. Mencius conserved that good government relies not upon brutality but upon the epitome of righteousness of the ruler. In relation to this, Mencius classified two types of government such as government of *wang* or sage-king and government of the *pa* or military lord.

The government of *wang* or the sage king is administered through ethical teaching and knowledge; that of a military leader is guided through power and coercion. Mencius said as the following;

"He who uses force in the place of virtue is a *pa*. He who is virtuous and practice human heatedness is a Wang. When one subdues men by force, they do

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<sup>1</sup> Fung Yu-Lan.(1948), *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. P-73

not submit to him in their hearts but only outwardly, because they insufficient strength to resist.”<sup>1</sup>

Mencius took for granted that a ruler should have a good ethical character. If a ruler does not possess the ethical qualities that make a good leader, it is the moral right of the people to revolt. This is because, if a monarch does not perform as he properly should, he is a “mere fellow”. Here, Mencius also stressed the significance of the part of the people in the government that the people have the right to topple an evil ruler.

Mencius also considered that the sage-king in his kingly government strives for the betterment of the people. Thus, according to Mencius, the state of good government is founded on a trustworthy economic basis.

His optimal system of the equal sharing of land is known as the well-field system. This system divided each square piece of land into nine equal squares, each with an area of one hundred Chinese acres. The one in the centre is called the “public field”, and the eight squares around it owned by eight farmers who cultivate the public field together and their fields on their own. The cultivated agriculture products of the public field are for the government, but each family gets for itself what it cultivates from its own field. Mencius suggested that every family ought to plant mulberry trees around its five-acre homestead in its own land for making silk dresses for their elders. Every family also ought to breed fowls and pigs, to feed healthy diet to the elders and the dead will be buried without any disappointment whatever. After advising such varied farming, Mencius also suggested to reduce taxes, like lessening levies on goods in demand, eradicating tolls and duties to promote travel and saving the traders and merchants from various offerings and punishments. This was how Mencius suggested the way a good government ought to improve the betterment of the people.

### **Political Thought of Han Fei Tzu**

One of the famous philosophers on Legalism was Han Fei Tzu. He was a member of the ruling aristocracy, having been born into the ruling family of the state of Han. According to historical records, he was, like Li Ssu, a student of Xun Zi.

Han Fei Tzu synthesized the methodologies of his predecessors. Before his time, there were three concepts in legalism. The rendition of the first one was initially given by Shen Tao<sup>4</sup>. He was a contemporary of Han Fei Tzu. According to Shen Tao, a ruler must have power and authority to reign a country of rigid unity.

The person who forwarded the second theory was Shen Pu-Hai. He pointed out that statecraft “*shu*”, in other words, the way of skillful management on the subordinates is most important. Hence, proper assigned tasks were given to the officials.

Shang Yang was the person who presented the third theory which emphasized on law and regulation “*fa*”. According to him, the officials could fulfill the tasks or duties, only when there was on law and regulation “*fa*”. Furthermore, it could exercise precisely on granting rewards and receiving punishments. The people also had to comply.

Han Fei Tzu regarded all three theories are essential characteristics in administration. According to him, the sage ruler is considered as the “Son of Heaven”, because he ruled with justice, regardless of the circumstances. It shows the importance of law and regulation. Further, the ruler is compared to a divine-being, because he could tactfully manipulate the people

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. P- 74

without being noticed. It shows that ruling a country is important. The ruler must have position and power so that the people would obey his commands. Han Fei Ztu said that all three characteristics were the tools of the Emperors and rulers. The country ruled by the one who was armed with these three would flourish.

Ruling the country with law and order means that rules and regulations should be relevant with the existing situations. The philosophy of Han Fei Tzu differed from those of the ancient philosophers who emphasized on traditions and past experiences. This means that it was based on the daily life of the Chinese people.

Han Fei Tzu conveyed new ways of administration to challenge new political conditions. The first step was that the ruler must impose laws and rules which would let the people know what to do and what not to. To abide by the law, they would be forced to follow the doctrine of rewards and punishments. It is a way of that, instead of raising the people up properly, they would be under close supervision and discouraged to become bad. In this way, the country would be peaceful. Not only commoners, but also the officials as well as the ministers must abide by the law. Whoever breaks the law would be punished. Likewise, rewards would be granted to who follows. Han Fei Tzu regarded that all are equal in the eyes of the law, except the ruler, who could overrule any official or existing law. He was the one who possessed authority and power to impose laws. He also claimed that the doctrine of rewards and punishment was practiced as human beings are essentially selfish and would shun away when danger confronted them.

In addition to the above-mentioned system, Han Fei Ztu insisted on the adequacy of economy. When population grew big, commodities became scarce and morals receded. Thus, to get on well with economy, agriculture was the solution to this.

Han Fei Ztu quoted that a country must have a strong army to keep away enemies. Therefore, those who were not engaged in agriculture, but in literature, and those who were unenlisted and scholarly were considered as useless. According to him, there were two types of people in society: the first consisted of 'useful' people and the second of 'useless and idle'. The 'useful' were farmers and soldiers, and entitled to be honored. The 'useless and idle' were officials of the court and unrealistic scholars. Consequently, he urged the government to suppress the idle scholars.

The ancient Chinese philosophers emphasized thoughts that concerned only on matters of politics and ethics. Ways of how to govern the country, for the development of the entire Chinese society, were considered. Most Chinese philosophers considered that the government is for the people and looks for the way to serve the people for their betterment. As legalists descended from the administrative class, they opposed the idea mentioned above and reflected only on the interest of their own. They claimed that law is important in administration. Therefore, it can be considered that legalism is viewed as a favoritism towards the administrative class.

## CONCLUSION

The period between BC-600 and BC-300 is very strange throughout Chinese history. At that time, there was no unity. It was as if a bundle of bamboo has become unfastened and disarrayed. The whole country was in disintegration. It was not united under one flag and one power. Small states, multiple kingdoms and clans warred among themselves for supremacy and there were torture, bloodshed and acts of brutality. It was said that in the period of warring states, the situation of the administration of China was unstable. Circumstances changed from day to day. There was no law and order, no unity, and no tranquility, but disintegration of the

society, hatred, and man-slaughter everywhere. Naturally, those who lived through the unrest and troubled times yearned for a fight for freedom. Consequently, in order to attain peace for humanity it was put into consideration, practically and theoretically. People were so used to struggling through the hard times that they wanted to live a free and easy life. They loathed the way they had to live. Thus, to pursue a peaceful society, various ways of thinking were introduced. As a rule, it was considered that in search of peace for humanity at the times of hostilities, Chinese philosophy came into existence.

Upon reviewing Chinese philosophy, it was thought to be in favor of the interests of individuals, but after studying the thoughts in detail, it was not as supposed to be. It gave guidance to live a fulfilling life.

Most Chinese philosophers believed that man is good by nature. They become bad due to environmental conditions and circumstantial impulses. Therefore, it was considered noble to be in an innate way of life. Chinese philosophers admired the act to exercise essentially, but despised if it was done consciously or deliberately. They were keened on living a common life.

Ancient Chinese focused mainly on daily conditions and life issues at present. They were interested in philosophical knowledge that tended to practically solve certain problems. Also, matters on socialization, politics and morals were given serious thoughts. The highest level of life did not mean a life in a world of fantasy. It could literally be a life for socializing and putting matters into practice. The Chinese philosophy, therefore, is interested in establishing a concept that is reasonably practical. Furthermore, the ancient Chinese philosophers approved the way the daily social issues were carried out on a customary basis. Some considered that Chinese philosophy as too explicit and inconsequential, while others regarded it as imaginative because it is concerned mainly on setting up a peaceful society. Both of these were right in their own way as in the Chinese philosophy the two perceptions were blended together.

It is undeniable that the ancient Chinese philosophers had good intentions to improve humanity. As they were brought up under the system of feudalism, what they had pursued reflected in their principles with a tendency towards the system. Feudal system was so deep down inside them that, although they had a benevolent attitude towards humanity, their concepts could not go beyond their social ambience. However, feudal administrative system is not reliable to modern world. Nevertheless, it is more likely that ancient Chinese philosophers stress ethics on political thought. They assumed that thoughts on politics and ethics are interrelated. Whether a person is a commoner or a ruler, everyone must value the code of ethics. It was believed that practicing ethically in politics is the noblest deed. Likewise, the outlook on the development on politics depends on virtue ethics is the basic concept of the ancient Chinese.

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