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A Search for the Rudiments of Political Thought in
Ancient Confucianism

This paper makes an honest attempt to bring to light some of the fundamental theories of political thought as had been conceived by the Chinese philosophers of the ancient Confucian school of thought about two thousand and five hundred years from now. Serious study of politics, analytical interpretations of political theories, defining and redefining of political terms $\frac{3}{4}$ are all of much recent origin. But the point of interest is the fact that contrary to the common man's belief that politics and philosophy are distantly related subjects, ancient Confucianism puts forth some of the earliest political theories and ideas about right methods of governance in a well organized manner.

Amidst unending controversies it has now been agreed upon that the first dynasty in Chinese history was the Xia Dynasty (2100 – 1600 BCE), followed by the Shang (1600 – 1100 BCE) and the Zhou (1100 – 221 BCE) with the latter occupying a position of immense significance for scholars of Chinese philosophy. If philosophy is believed to be the systematic manifestation of thought then the Zhou dynasty had prepared the ground for sowing the seeds of philosophical thought in China for the very first time ever. Soon after it's emergence in the political arena, the Zhou dynasty elaborated a feudal society whereby the Chinese territory got divided into several hundred small feudal states, each of which paid allegiance to the royal house of Zhou. As years rolled by, many of these feudal rulers usurped power and started declaring themselves independent. The few more powerful feudal states began contending with one another in order to bring the less powerful ones under their control. Incessant warfare gave way to social unrest and political instability. The panic-stricken, suffering masses endured the agony silently, in the hope of being led into a new world of peace and stability some day. An age of geographical as well as intellectual expansion gradually set in. It was during this historical period of social and political upheaval that the war-torn feudal states of China witnessed the emergence of several progressive thinkers, who in order to pacify the troubled times earnestly offered philosophical solutions to the prevalent political and social problems.

The most outstanding of them all was perhaps Kungfuzi or Master Kung (551 – 479 BCE), more popularly recognized by the latinized version of the name, Confucius. The philosophical school of thought which he founded, later came to be known as the Confucian school (Rujia in Chinese, meaning school of the literati). Since the deteriorating political conditions of his time had acted as catalyst in helping Confucius give full expression to his latent thoughts and emotions, political thoughts figured out most prominently in his philosophical teachings. Having keenly

observed the disintegrating social and political institutions, Confucius realized that the absence of an efficient governing system, lack of sincerity on the part of those in power and decadence of moral values among the common masses were some of the principal reasons for anarchy.

He envisaged a society based on good government and harmonious human relations. Driven by a sense of mission, he formulated his political thoughts accordingly. Confucius perceived the state to be an amalgamation of several mutually influential units, the smallest being that of the individual, the next in line being the family, followed in turn by the society and finally the state functioning as the largest unit. The family was viewed as an extension of the individual, the society as an extension of the family and the state as the extension of the society. In order to ensure proper governance at the state level, the individual, Confucius believed would have to be governed first. Proper governance of the individual in turn could only be brought about by educating the common masses and encouraging them to cultivate the virtues of benevolence (ren), righteousness (i), propriety (li), conscientiousness (zhong) and altruism (shu). It was with this end in view that Confucius conceived the idea of imparting education to the common masses irrespective of their social and economic background, an idea by far revolutionary as education was still a privilege meant to be enjoyed by the influential few. While the common people were supposed to play their own little bit, the ruler of the state was expected to shoulder the prime responsibility and play the pivotal role.

This was because Confucius believed that in a government though nobility where the masses were uneducated, the ruler's personal conduct would surely exert a great shaping influence upon that of the common man. Book XII. Chapter XIX of the Analects (Lunyu, Confucius' recorded conversations with his disciples, believed to have been compiled in the 3rd century BCE) supports this view where Confucius is reported to have said, "The moral character of the ruler is the wind, the moral character of those beneath him is the grass. When the grass has wind upon it, it assuredly bends."

For the common people to turn towards him and follow him, the person in complete control of the state would have to be one of good moral character and ability. Therefore Confucius strongly advocated the need for virtuous men to occupy positions of power and authority. He preached that which could be called the way of the "Inner sage" and the "Outer King". An ideal ruler would have to be one who would have had established virtue in himself and yet must have had accomplished great deeds in the world. This indeed represented a bold reform as official positions and social status were still inherited. The virtue of 'ren' variously translated as benevolence or kindness reigned supreme in Confucian teachings so much so that it was expected to be the root of any social or political institution. Book II Chapter I of the Analects reads thus, "He who exercises government by means of virtue may be compared to the north pole star which keeps its place while all the other stars turn towards it."

Another important dictum that coloured Confucian political philosophy was

the principle of 'Rectification of Names' (zhengming). Confucius was always of the opinion that the names of objects must necessarily correspond to their characteristic properties and that the world around him had lost much of its order primarily because the actualities of things no longer corresponded to their names. If a successful operation of the political system was to be ensured then it would be mandatory for everyone in society right from the ruler down to the common man to exhibit properties corresponding to their names, failing of which would lead to rectification of names. A ruler would thus be named so only if he was found to possess the qualities of a ruler, the moment he would be found lacking in his moral and professional ability, his title would be stripped off. This rule would stand firm for nobles, ministers and even the common man. An efficient political system based on ethical principles was the end for which Confucius worked relentlessly. Although his political thoughts were at times viewed as being too idealistic to be put into practice, Confucius can truly be said to have been more than just a philosopher, perhaps the first progressive social and political reformer of ancient China.

As Socrates had his Plato, so also Confucius had his Mencius. Mengzi or Master Meng, often referred to by the latinized version of the name, Mencius (371 - 289 BCE) was a fifth generation philosopher of the ancient Confucian school of philosophy and undoubtedly the most prominent of all who added a new dimension to all the segments of Confucian philosophy by developing it along idealistic lines. In the arena of political thought, Mencius took a big stride forward by being the first among the ancient and contemporary philosophers to have used the term "humane" or "humanitarian" government. He maintained that all political and economic institutions were to be established for the welfare of the people and that the rulers were to be put in office to serve the people as their representatives, a political theory very much in contradiction to the traditional ones which promoted the establishment of all institutions for the benefit of the ruling aristocracy. The 'masses' according to Mencius were the most important element of any state, the spirits of the land and grain being secondary and the sovereign being the least. No other philosopher in China prior to Mencius had ever attached so much of importance to the interests and well-being of the commoners. It was this revolutionary theory of 'government for the masses' that won Mencius the reputation of being the first and the greatest advocate of political democracy in Chinese history.

The last of the eminent Confucian scholars was Xunzi (298 - 238 BCE). While Mencius or Mengzi was the forerunner of idealistic Confucianism, Xunzi rose to prominence as the advocate of naturalistic Confucianism. Apart from excelling in his specialized spheres of study which included psychology and logic, Xunzi made valuable contributions in carrying forward the legacy of the Confucian political thought. He opined that the sovereign's responsibility was by far the most significant. A reflection of this idea is seen in Chapter XXI in the Book of Xunzi which reads thus, "..... Therefore to be Emperor, be the right man. The empire is the heaviest thing that there can ever be, only the strongest man is able to bear

it's weight, it is the largest of all, only the most discriminating is able to make it's proper distinctions, it is the most populous, only the most wise is able to harmonize it.". He also put forth a very important aspect of political democracy when he emphatically pointed out that the real power of the state rested in the hands of the people. In his words, "The ruler is the boat, the people are the water, the water can support the boat or can capsize it."

A critical study of ancient Confucianism therefore reveals the fact that amidst grave discussions on ethics and metaphysics it did bring to light valuable thoughts related to political philosophy.

With the passage of time, ancient Confucianism along with the other popular contemporary schools of thought namely Daoism and Buddhism gradually made way for Neo-Confucianism ³/₄ that which is known to have exerted immense influence upon Chinese thought and the Chinese way of life for the past several hundred years. Meanwhile, with the turning of centuries, the world too witnessed major historical and political events, all of which painted the international political canvas in fresh colours of red and yellow. Compared to the troubled ancient Zhou times, social and political problems of the international community in the present century have increased manifold. Nations have become politically segregated, the common people have become ideologically and religiously divided. Yet the basic Confucian political thought of virtuous, humanitarian, competent men occupying positions of power and serving the interests of the common masses to the best of their ability, a theory which had been conceived two and a half millennia from now seem to offer an acceptable solution. Certain significant elements of ancient Confucian political thought, owing to their universal nature are still found reverberating in the fundamental policies of the modern political systems. This is so because, be it communism, democracy or dictatorship, they all have one common end in view, it being the welfare of the common masses.

* In spelling the Chinese names, the universal pinyin method of romanization has been used.