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Confucian Thesis of Moral Politics and its Development

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Abstract. This paper aims to examine Confucian thesis of moral politics. By comparing three types of administration, Confucius' thoughts on the problematics of moral politics are analyzed in more detail, highlighting the inner tension between the moral and the political. The difficulty of the concept is shown by discussing its development so that the validity question can be brought to the fore. In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the moral politics, it is necessary to first address three distinct approaches to its development. We call the consanguinity-based system of administration of the Western Zhou feudal system *Lǐ-Chih* (禮治). This implies using the rites (禮) as the primary means of state governance. Comparatively speaking, the morality-governed administrative method is known as *Dé-Chih* (德治). The third, *Fǎ-Chih* (法治), denotes that laws are the basis for state governance. The interdependence of rites, morals, and law makes it impossible to simply divide the three modes of administration. The theory of moral politics offers new avenues for development since China adopted the democratic system. A group of Chinese academics known as the New Confucians attempted to integrate this theory with the democratic system in the early 20th century in an attempt to find a fresh approach to the theory's application issue. This theory still revolves around *Dé-Chih*. *Fǎ-Chih*'s authenticity is amply verified. The New Confucians regard the conflict between *Dé-Chih* and *Dé-Chih* as a dialectical evolution.

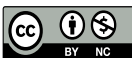
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Конфуцианский тезис о моральной политике и его развитие

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Аннотация. В работе рассматриваются принципы моральной политики исторического конфуцианства и предлагаются положения морали в политике в дальнейшем развитии конфуцианской мысли. Представлены три типа государственного управления с точки зрения конфуцианства. Подробно анализируются концепции Конфуция относительно моральной политики, подчеркивается внутренняя связь между моральным и политическим. Сложность концепции моральной политики показана через историю ее развития, выводя на первый план три различных подхода: систему управления династией Западного Чжоу Lǐ-Chih (禮治), основанную на кровосмешении и использовании обрядов (禮) в качестве основного средства управления государством; административный метод, основанный на морали, известный как Dé-Chih (德治); и третий, Fǎ-Chih (法治), предполагающий, что в основе управления государством лежат законы. Взаимозависимость обрядов, морали и закона делает невозможным простое разделение трех способов управления, однако теория моральной политики предлагает новые возможности для развития. Группа китайских ученых, известных как «Новые Конфуцианцы», в начале XX века предприняла попытку интегрировать эту теорию с демократической системой для поиска нового подхода к применению теории. «Новые Конфуцианцы» рассматривают конфликт между Fǎ-Chih и Fǎ-Chih как диалектическую эволюцию.

Ключевые слова: конфуцианство, мораль, ритуалы и обряды в политике, Fǎ-Chih, Lǐ-Chih, Dé-Chih

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Introduction

From the very beginning, Confucianism has been regarded as a *doctrine of concern for disaster* (憂患之學)¹, i.e., a doctrine to eliminate political and social

¹ Since Mencius said that “life is stimulated from concern for disaster, and death results from settling in happiness” [1. 6B15], Confucians have always strongly emphasized the awareness of concern for

unrest. Therefore, Confucians generally have a strong political motivation to take office so that the Confucian ideal of “*Nèi-Shèng and Wài-Wáng (內聖外王)*” – inner sagelihood and outer kingliness – can be realized through their political power. According to their thesis, which is referred to here as the *thesis of moral politics*, one can restore order to politics through moral self-cultivation and instruction. This thesis presupposes morality is a sufficient and necessary condition for political order. For Confucians, ethics, and politics are thus two inseparable sides of a single entity.

The pre-imperial Confucians liked to take the legendary “Holy Kings” (聖王) such as Yáo (堯), Shùn (舜) and Yü (禹) as models of morality for the thesis of moral politics. It is said that these “holy kings” ruled their “empire” solely based on morality and thus brought peace and tranquility to the population. Based on this firm conviction, the pre-imperial Confucians attributed the chaos of the *Eastern Zhou Dynasty* to the fact that the rulers of their time were no longer interested in such *moral politics (仁政)* but in *hegemonic politics (霸政)*.² They considered moral rulers to be an essential key to solving political chaos. Therefore, the Confucians’ primary means of realizing their ideal was to convince rulers to implement moral policies. Despite their efforts, their attempt could not be realized during this warlike period. Nevertheless, they did not touch on whether the political can be reduced to the moral at all. Their failure in the realistic-political sphere could not lead the Confucians to doubt the validity of the thesis of moral politics. Even the criticism from *Mohists (墨家)* and *Legalists (法家)* could not change the Confucians’ opinion about the thesis. Therefore, after a short period of neglect in that warlike time, the same thesis quickly resurfaced when Confucianism became the state ideology in the Hân dynasty. After that, the validity of the thesis was not discussed for a long time until the doctrine of democracy from the West clashed with China’s absolutism.

This paper aims to examine the thesis of moral politics and its development in the pre-imperial time. First, three types of administration are presented in preparation for further analysis. Secondly, Confucius’ thoughts on this thesis will be analyzed in more detail, highlighting the inner tension between the moral and the political. Then, we will find out the difficulty of this thesis by discussing its development so that the validity question can be brought to the fore.

disaster. They regard it as the necessary condition for cultivation. For instance, it is stated in the famous “Manifesto for Communicating Chinese Culture to the World (為中國文化敬告世界人士宣言),” for which four important New Confucians – *Carsun Chang (張君勱)*, *Táng Chun-i (唐君毅)*, *Mou Tsung-san (牟宗三)* and *Hsü Fù-Kuān (徐復觀)* – gave their signatures that the real wisdom comes from disaster [2. P. 851].

² This difference can also be referred to as difference between “rule by virtue” and “rule by force”.

Three Methods of Administration

To thoroughly examine the thesis of moral politics, we need to discuss in advance three different modes of administration concerning the evolution of this thesis. We refer to the Western Zhou feudal system's mode of administration based on consanguinity as Lǐ-Chìh (禮治). This means governing the state mainly through the rites (禮). In comparison, the method of administration governed by morality is called Dé-Chìh (德治). The third is called Fǎ-Chìh (法治) and means that the state is governed based on laws. The three modes of administration cannot be easily separated because the relationship between rites, morality, and law is complicated.

Lǐ-Chìh

People in the Zhou dynasty indeed claimed that *Heaven* (天) took the *mandate* (命) from the Shāng (商) dynasty and gave it to them because of their virtue when they resisted and defeated the Shāng. However, this claim can instead be seen as a plea by the Zhou dynasty for the legitimacy of their regime. This does not necessarily mean that the Zhou dynasty ruled their empire through morality. It is known that a multi-divided but closely related feudal class society was formed in the early Western Zhou Dynasty. In order to clearly distinguish each class from each other, social rules of behavior – rites (禮) – were introduced accordingly. The rites of the Zhou period were not only limited to the religious sphere but also concerned with everyday behaviors between different classes when interacting or changing status, etc. Therefore, the concept of “rites” of the Zhou period is very similar to today's concept of “rituals.”

Ritual now means a symbolic social action performed repeatedly in a standardized manner on certain occasions. The ritual action, therefore, presupposes a normative rule previously prescribed by traditional convention and is a part of social control [3]. Such social control is based on social pressure from the members of society. If a man incorrectly performs or neglects a ritual contrary to his particular social role, he makes others uncomfortable and is reprimanded as *impolite* or *ill-mannered*. As a member of the same society, he should know the symbolism of the ritual. His violation of the symbolic ritual shows his lack of respect for the other members. So, he even suffers social isolation as a sanction until he is *resocialized* again. This is the passive group-bonding power of the rituals.

Furthermore, rituals are usually performed without reflection through imitation and habit. This is why rituals tend to degenerate into meaningless formal symbol systems. This means that although we are already familiar with a ritual action and its symbolism, we need to understand why these two things are connected. The more complicated a ritual is, the less we understand why the ritual is defined in this way. The definition of the ritual is now seen as arbitrary. This is why rituals lose the active power to ignite people's passion for proactive integration into society. In short, a meaningless ritual is performed to avoid conflict with real society. In this case, the ritual primarily concerns *heteronomy*.

Dé-Chih

Morality, on the other hand, has to do with *autonomy*. It is also a system of norms for actions observed in a particular society. However, these norms are not observed because of social or state sanctions but for *their own* sake. In other words, a moral act is not out of fear of external sanctions but of internal moral motives. Morality determines which actions are considered good and which are considered bad. If you act against morality, your conscience will speak up. The rebuke of one's conscience is usually stricter than that of society. Because you are now not merely rude, you are *bad*. That is why we behave well of our own free will in order to calm our conscience. At the same time, morality makes a strong universal claim on *all* people. No one can exclude themselves from their moral duties. This first implies the priority of the moral norm over the ritual norm. A morally good man who misbehaves is nevertheless more respected than one who behaves well but is bad. Secondly, the universal claim is a view of the nature of man. Every human being is essentially the same as a rational being and, therefore, fully capable of upholding all morals, no matter what social role they take on. This is why the concept of social classes plays no role in the moral sphere. Thirdly, an ideal of society is presented here in which everyone has equal rights and trusts each other. The universal claim contrasts an immoral world in which everyone acts against everyone only through their power. Morality necessarily demands the proactive establishment of such an ideal society so that its members all show solidarity with one another.

Although ritual is not necessarily at odds with morality, the two belong to different categories. Here they can also be understood under the distinction introduced by Roetz between *conventional* and *post-conventional morality*.³ Since these two types of norms are based on different grounds, the *Lǐ-Chih* and *Dé-Chih* modes of administration that result from them have different characteristics. The former emphasizes heteronomy and class consciousness, while the latter emphasizes autonomy and human equality. Therefore, *Lǐ-Chih* and *Dé-Chih* do not coincide in essence.⁴

Fǎ-Chih

If one wants to comprehend the mode of *Fǎ-Chih*, she or he has to look at it from a different perspective. Only if clearly defined laws govern a state and no one is exempted from observing the laws because of their personal position can it be considered *Fǎ-Chih* in principle. Legally established laws, which must be publicly

³ Roetz adopts Hegel's distinction between "Sittlichkeit" and "Moralität" from his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* to explain the difference between "rites" (禮) and "humanity" (仁). He describes rites as conventional morality and humanity as post-conventional morality. [4. P. 46–50; 3. P. 72–74.]

⁴ Since Confucius wants to connect the two modes of administration (see point 3.1), most researchers confuse or even identify them with each other. For example, Wú Kāng (吳康) does see the difference between *Dé* (德) and *Lǐ* (禮), but he still sees *Dé-Chih* (德治) and *Lǐ-Chih* (禮治) as synonyms [5. P. 86–88].

promulgated and set down in writing, are therefore necessary for *Fǎ-Chih*. Laws can only prescribe the external actions of people, just as in the case of rites. But the transgression of the law is punished more specifically and severely by state penalties, as the validity of the law should be without exception. In this case, the effect of social control through laws is as good as that through morals.

The decisive difference is that the law is only a functional means of controlling society. Therefore, on the one hand, there is no symbolic or moral meaning in it – the essence of the law has nothing to do with politeness or morality. On the other hand, the concrete content of the law is linked to various socio-political structures and is therefore dependent on them. For instance, a democratic state has laws enacted by the people themselves and to be obeyed; a dictatorial state has laws generated according to the will of the leader, etc. Despite this diversity of laws, the concept of *Fǎ-Chih* is nevertheless limited. Only the administration method that gives the law the highest priority can be qualified as *Fǎ-Chih*. Everyone can only do what the law allows. One may even say that the law is independent or self-acting here. However, it is not permitted for the administrator to have the extraordinary power to make the final decision on his own will, regardless of the law. The latter case is called *Rén-Chih* (人治), i.e. rule of man.

Lǐ-Chih and *Dé-Chih* belong to *Rén-Chih* because the two modes of administration do not give absolute priority to the law. This does not imply that there are absolutely no laws in *Lǐ-Chih* and *Dé-Chih*. Furthermore, *Fǎ-Chih* does not necessarily exclude rites and morality. The crux of the distinction between *Lǐ-Chih*, *Dé-Chih*, and *Fǎ-Chih* lies in what kind of norm – ritual, morality, or law – should be given preferential treatment in the political sphere. Although the thesis of moral politics is aimed at the ideal of *Dé-Chih*, Confucians nevertheless attempt to link it to some extent with *Lǐ-Chih* or *Fǎ-Chih*. This leads to a tension within the thesis of moral politics and will be clarified in the following discussion.

The Justification of the Thesis of Moral Politics

The Aim of Confucius' Reform Project

Confucius (551–479 BC) was a descendant of the *Shāng* and was born in the *state of Lǔ* (魯國). It is said that the ritual system of the Western Zhou Dynasty was most completely preserved in the *state of Lǔ* compared to other states until shortly before Confucius [6] (Book X: Duke Zhao, second Year). Since Confucius had grown up and been educated in this “state of rites”, it is not surprising that he felt deep affection for the traditional rites of the Zhou Dynasty. What is strange, however, is his rescue work for the decaying rite system of the Western Zhou Dynasty. He tried to give moral meaning to the ritual system so that its validity could be restored. In this case, Confucius was seen as a reformer of the Zhou feudal system because he defended its *Lǐ-Chih* mode of administration and created a new basis for it. He pursued the goal of *Dé-Chih*. However, he also claimed that the two modes of administration should complement each other. Therefore, in the political

sphere, he only asked himself how the two could be combined. It was a self-evident prerequisite for his assertion that the political could be thoroughly determined by the norms of morality (and ritual). He thus introduced the thesis of moral politics.

To explain this, we can first discuss Confucius' goal of reformation. According to the account in the chapter “*Lǐyùn*” of *Liji* (禮記-禮運), there were two kinds of political ideals for Confucius. The first was before the Xia Dynasty when the world was the common property of all people, and everyone cared for everyone else. At that time, the great *Tào* (道) – a universal principle of human good behavior – was still flowing in the world. The second was realized in the period between the Xia Dynasty and the earlier Western Zhou Dynasty, or the reigns of Xia King *Yü* (禹), Shāng King *Tāng* (湯), and the Zhou Kings *Wén* (文), *Wǔ* (武) and *Chéng* (成). At that time, the great *Tào* hid itself from the world, and everyone cared only for their relatives. However, the world was brought into an orderly course through rites [7] (9 – *Lǐyùn*). The former ideal can be described as the *order of the common good* (大同之治) and corresponds to *Dé-Chih*; the latter can be described as the *order of prosperity* (小康之治) and corresponds to *Lǐ-Chih*. It seems that Confucius' political goal was to realize the two ideals in fusion in his time. But how is this fusion theoretically possible?

Moral Foundation of the Rites

In Confucius' time, the traditional rites were held in less esteem⁵ and most people did not think it was a bad thing to simplify the rites⁶ since those complicated rites were no longer necessary and prevented one from maximizing social and state benefits. The crisis of the ritual system arose from the general disdain. Therefore, Confucius' most urgent task was to restore the value of the rites. Yet what Confucius wanted to preserve was not simply the traditional ritual forms. He did not ignore the fact that conventional ritual forms always change over time.⁷ In his opinion, however, the change in ritual forms still leaves something unchangeable that cannot be determined by empirical randomness. This is the essence of the rites – the *root of the rites* (禮之本). It could not be identified with the ritual action or instrument – the *incident of the rites* (禮之末) [8. 17.11, 19.12], although the former must be expressed through the latter. Confucius also stated that the rites had their roots *in heaven* [7] (9 – *Lǐyùn*) and that the essence of the rites should, therefore, be a transcendental principle whose application in different times and spaces caused correspondingly different forms of rites. In this way, Confucius laid the foundation for the rites and their evolution. Thanks to this principle, the ritual

⁵ For instance, in those days, if someone served his ruler entirely according to the rites, he could paradoxically be called a flatterer [8. 3.18].

⁶ Even Confucius' famous disciples, such as *Zǐ-Gòng* (子貢) and *Zāi-Wǒ* (宰我), agreed. Cf. [8. 3.17, 17.21]

⁷ Confucius already recognized that the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties' rites differed from each other. Cf. [7] (31 (*Zhōngyōng*)) and also [8. 2.23].

system of the Western Zhou Dynasty still retained the value of its existence, but every change to it had to be tested by the same principle. According to Confucius, if an old rite still suited the principle better, it should be followed; but if a new rite suited the principle better, then the old one should be abandoned [8. 9.3, 3.4].

Confucius tried to emphasize the transcendental principle as the essence of rites from empirical forms of rites and called it *Rén* (仁). *Rén* is understood to mean a principle according to which people should properly and humanely treat each other.⁸ We can, therefore, refer to this principle here as “humanity.” Humanity determines the relationships between people in a normative way, which arises from human nature. Only when one acts appropriately per the heart in all interpersonal relationships can one be qualified to be characterized as a *benevolent human* (仁者) or addressed with the honorific title of *Noble* (君子)⁹. According to Confucius, acting humanely is not beyond human’s ability. *In principle, every human* cannot behave contrary to humanity, even if he wanted to [4. 4.6]. But it is difficult for anyone to attain the standard of humanity at *any time* fully.¹⁰ Even Confucius admitted that he could not reach the perfect humanity [8. 7.34, 14.28].

Nevertheless, it remains the ideal purpose of moral practice, guiding people in the uplifting to humanity. Furthermore, the content of humanity was not clearly defined in the *Lúnyǔ* (論語) – also known as *Analects*. In contrast, Confucius specifically mentioned various virtues as conditions for the realization of humanity. In our opinion, this can be explained by the fact that humanity has to do with *practical reason* – or rather, *phronesis*. In other words, humanity is a unique knowledge that can only be acquired *through action* and *in action*. Only in a specific situation can a judgment be made about a moral action. Therefore, what Confucius taught his students can be better interpreted in terms of *how*, but not *what*. Accordingly, when asked about the same virtue, he almost always answered them differently. Because of their unique personalities, his disciples each needed different advice and different explanations in order to acquire the virtue¹¹.

⁸ Since Mencius, Confucians have begun to identify *Rén* with the moral sense, the *love of man*. Cf. [9. 4B]: “仁者愛人”.] This widespread attitude has its origins in Confucius’ answer to Fán-Chí’s (樊遲) question about *Rén*. Cf. [8. 12.22]: “樊遲問仁。子曰：愛人。”] This interpretation, which emerged 100 years after Confucius’ death, can be seen as a significant evolution of Confucianism, but it accepts the contextual meaning of “humanity” in *Lúnyǔ*. I, therefore, place this Mencius’ interpretation in brackets and explain the concept of humanity in its original context as far as possible.

⁹ The original meaning of the term “君子 (Junzi)” is the *son of the ruler* and is therefore limited to the administrative classes [10. P. 95–96]. Since Confucius, “君子” has become an ethical terminology in the Chinese-speaking culture and does not indicate noble origin, but noble attitude and behavior. Nevertheless, the same term is not yet used unambiguously in *Lúnyǔ* and means moral noble or civil servant noble.

¹⁰ Even Confucius’ most esteemed disciple, Yan Hui (顏回), could only enjoy the standard of humanity for three months [8. 6.7].

¹¹ In this case, Confucius’ disciples asked him about a particular virtue that was not out of interest in *theoretical knowledge* but out of interest in *moral practice*. Therefore, these types of questions are

Virtue is an attitude of observing the corresponding moral rules. Since virtues can only ever present themselves to us in social practices, their performance must adapt to the customs of society to a certain extent. In the Zhou period, the ritual system, which determined the appropriateness of action in all interpersonal relationships, was the scope for the practical virtues. One should try to be virtuous in a social environment restricted by rites. Through the mediation of virtues, humanity and rituals formed a unity. Without humanity, rites have no living meaning [8. 3.3]; without rites, humanity loses its possible realization.

Spreading Morality into the Political Sphere

The *Liji* lists a total of seven fundamental interpersonal relationships in the Zhou period, i.e. father-son, brotherhood, husband-wife, ruler-subordinate, elder-younger, friendship and host-guest.¹² All relationships were under the reins of ritual. However, only one type of relationship here seems to be political. In reality, because of the feudal system of the time, more relationships were political. This was reflected in the ritual system of that class society. The complexity of the rites of the Zhou dynasty already presupposed a corresponding political hierarchy. Now Confucius generally gave the rites a moral meaning and therefore introduced not only the moralization of the rites, but also that of the political. This had two consequences. On the one hand, political order or unrest became a moral matter in general, because it depended on the moral attitude of all people. On the other hand, everyone was responsible for the political because the universal claim of moral norms permeated all social classes.

Confucius' rescue plan for the political-social crisis can be outlined in the following three phases. First, the moral attitude is awakened so that one has a motive to act on one's initiative according to the ritual system. Secondly, the ritual system must cling to the existing feudal system so that no one oversteps the boundaries of their class. Thirdly, state punishment can now be dispensed with, not only because the state is harmoniously stabilized again, but because such a state of morality does not need a penal code. When the rescue plan is completed, the ideal of the order of the common good will be achieved again.¹³ Confucius summarized

best understood in the form of *how-questions*. For instance, when his students ask about “humanity (仁)”, the question should be understood as follows: *How* can humanity be achieved? If you write this question in the form of a *what-question*, such as “*What* is humanity?”, then you are likely to have doubts about Confucius' inconsistent answers.

¹² Cf. [7] (5 (*Wángzhì*): “七教：父子、兄弟、夫婦、君臣、長幼、朋友、賓客。”). The seven interpersonal relationships are later simplified into five cardinal relationships – ruler and subordinate, father and son, husband and wife, brotherhood, friendship – in another chapter of *Liji*, i.e. in [7] (31 (*Zhōngyōng*): “君臣也、父子也、夫婦也、昆弟也、朋友之交也，五者天下之達道也。”).

¹³ This three-stage process is also described with a more complex cultivation process from the inside out in the Chapter *Dàxué* of *Liji* (禮記-大學) as follows: from the investigation of the matter (格物) to the attainment of knowledge (致知), the sincerity of the feelings (誠意), the rectification of the

this idea in one sentence: “Restraining oneself to return to the rites causes humanity” (克己復禮為仁) [8. 12.1]. As we have analyzed the first phase, the others will be explained here.

In the Zhou period of decaying rites, only few realized the rites correctly. The aristocrats often used the forms of rites that were not suitable for their own estates, whether out of ignorance or on purpose. The confusion of ritual forms caused the chaos of social identity. As a result, a man’s status could no longer be recognized simply by his ritual actions. Confucius considered confusion of *names* (名) to be a cause of this chaos, because the bearer of a name no longer corresponded to the inner meaning of the name – to reality. His measure against this situation of “*Míng Shí Bù Fú* (名實不符)” was the so-called “*rectification of names* (正名)”. He stated that the correctness of the name was the basis for the political order. His reasoning lay: “If the name is incorrect, then the words do not correspond to the matters. If the words do not correspond to the matters, then the matters are not accomplished. If the matters are not accomplished, then the rites do not prosper. If the rites do not prosper, then the punishments are not appropriate. If the punishments are not appropriate, then the people do not know what to follow.” [8. 13.3]. One can only act appropriately with established ritual forms, even if one wants to act according to the ritual system on one’s initiative. Confucius regarded the establishment of ritual forms, which should be carried out by *rectification of names*, as the task of the government. He therefore understood “governing (政)” to mean “rectifying (正)” [8. 12.17]. The government should establish the correct relationship between name and reality concerning rites, so that the ruler and the subordinate each behave according to their social status [8. 12.11], and each does not care about anything outside their political position [8. 8.14]. Moreover, the ritual system is a conventional system that is not essentially immutable. For this reason, it requires an external force from politics to guarantee the practical validity of its uniformly determined ritual forms. In this case, the *rectification of names* is carried out by a political measure, especially from the top down, because it only works if the ruler first wants to observe the rites that restrain him. No one will observe if the ruler arbitrarily neglects the correctly established rites [8. 13.13, 12.17]. The measure of the *rectification of names* begins with the ruler behaving like a ruler and setting an example for his subordinates or the people. Then the subordinates may follow him wholeheartedly.

The third phase occurs if one can always act according to rites in the seven basic interpersonal relationships. Here Confucius distinguished rites (禮) from penalties (刑), and despised the political function of the latter. This is the logical consequence of his theory. Given the moralization of rites, one performs ritual action only out of individual duty, not social compulsion. Furthermore, the government must oppose coercion and, if possible, invoke the virtuous ruler as the

will (正心), the cultivation of the self (修身), the ordering of the family (齊家), the governing of the state (治國), and then finally to the pacification of the world (平天下). [7. 42 (*Dàxué*)]

authority of moral education. The two reasons mentioned above make the use of government penalties seem unnecessary. Yet Confucius' explanation for this is even more profound. He said: "If the people are guided by administrative measures and ordered by penalties, they will try to avoid the penalties but will have no sense of shame. If the people are guided by morality and ordered by rites, they will have a sense of shame and behave justly" [8. 2.3]. Confucius stated that a state brought into order through penalty is not an ideal of the state. In such a police state, people only refrain from committing a crime out of fear of severe punishment, not because they want to avoid shame, which presupposes an awareness of morality. On the other hand, Confucius saw *humanity* as the ultimate criterion of political order. For justice exists, not when each supervises the other and guards himself against the other, but when he supervises himself and guards his right. In other words, Confucius based just politics on autonomy, but not on *heteronomy*, insofar as his contempt for punishment was based on the awareness of morality. This is how the thesis of moral politics emerged: morality developed into the political through the practice of rites.

About the construction of the thesis of moral politics, the moral foundation of rites theoretically occurs before the spread of moralized rites into the political sphere. Given the use of this thesis in politics, however, the mode of administration determined by the ritual system must be carried out before the moral one, insofar as the ritual system is a necessary means to ideal politics. In this practical sense, Confucius' reform project can also be divided into two phases: (1) carrying out the rite system of the Western Zhou Dynasty to restore the previous *order of prosperity*. (2) Governing the state entirely through morality to achieve the ideal of *ordering the common good*.¹⁴

Emphasizing the Ideal Ruler

There is something else that can supplement the thesis of moral politics. It concerns the function of the ruler as such in Confucius' theory. In point 3.2, we mentioned in passing that the ruler should be a role model for his subordinates. This applies not only to politics or rites but also to moral practice. The virtuous ruler is required as a role model.

In truth, this extraordinary demand is not necessary for the thesis of moral politics. For during the moralization of the political, *everyone* has the duties to become virtuous and to act according to the rules of his class or position. Accordingly, the ruler is not morally superior to his subordinates. Moreover, Confucius was concerned with the continuation of the entire ritual system, in which the ruler of a state plays nothing but a functional role. In this respect, a state without a ruler that nevertheless has a ritual system is better than a state that has no ritual

¹⁴ Concerning the explanation of Confucius' two-phase view, one can also refer to: Wu Kan (吳康), *Kong Meng Xun Zhexue* (孔孟荀哲學) [10. P. 152–154].

system but only its ruler.¹⁵ In a word, the ruler is no more noble than others in the political sphere. Nevertheless, Confucius still affirmed, to a certain extent, the priority of the ruler over his subordinates because he did not completely renounce the asymmetrical relationship between ruler and subordinate in the feudal system, which was closely linked to the ritual system. He understood the ruler-subordinate relationship to be a variant of the father-son relationship, in which the son should not contradict his father. For instance, the son should gently dissuade the father from making mistakes, but if the father does not listen to his advice, he should still respectfully comply [8. 4.18]. It is similar when the subordinate is at the service of his ruler. The subordinate should not oppose his ruler directly, even if the latter does not want to accept the former's advice. Otherwise, the subordinate can resign and leave his ruler or may even be sentenced to death in the worst case if he still continues to criticize his ruler unbendingly.¹⁶

According to the old rites, the subordinate in this case does not have the right to deprive the ruler of his ancestral throne, let alone kill him. In the opposite case, however, things seem to be different. Because of this asymmetry of relationship, the ruler has greater leeway than the subordinate and plays an authoritarian role in politics. Confucius must, therefore, emphasize the importance of the virtuous ruler as the ideal ruler in his rescue work because it is the key to driving his political ideal.

Being an ideal ruler is a complex matter. In the chapter *Zhōngyōng* of the *Liji* (禮記-中庸), Confucius defined nine tasks that the ruler must fulfill in order to govern a state: cultivating the self, honoring capable and virtuous people, loving relatives, respecting ministers, understanding all subordinates, treating the common people as his children, attracting all kinds of craftsmen to immigrate, appeasing distant people, and appeasing princes [7] (31 (*Zhōngyōng*)). He also pointed out that there is no way for people to accomplish all of these nine tasks other than “to be self-sincere (誠身)” and “to understand the good (明善)” [7] (31 (*Zhōngyōng*)). If one understands what is good and is sincere – corresponding to one's authentic feelings – then one can autonomously perform good deeds in every respect. Although this is the most crucial thing for an ideal ruler, more conditions need to be met. He should also act seriously according to the rites [8. 15.33]. Such acts performed with good will still require the conventional form so that feelings can be brought into harmony to a reasonable degree and one can behave in the state in a perfectly appropriate interpersonal manner. In a word, the ruler should first restrain

¹⁵ Cf. [8. 3.5.] In the Zhou Dynasty, some princes or even kings were sent into exile because of tyranny. They still retained the title of ruler, even though their ministers ruled their state by proxy.

¹⁶ For example, Confucius called three subordinates of the tyrannical Shang-king Zhò (商紂王) *benevolent humans* (仁者), precisely because they observed the rites of the subordinates. Cf. [8. 18.1.: “衛子去之；箕子為之奴；比干諫而死。孔子曰：殷有三仁焉！”] These rites concerning the subordinate (or son) towards his ruler (or father) are also recorded in the chapter *Qū-Lǐ* B of *Liji* (禮記. 曲禮下) as follows: “為人臣之禮，不顯諫。三諫而不聽，則逃之。子之事親也，三諫而不聽，則號泣而隨之。” [7] (2 (*Qūli* B)).

himself in regard to humanity and turn to the rites while exercising rule. He should be a noble and, at the same time, play the role of the mainspring of ritual.

Confucius stated that the common people could be obedient and deferential and the subordinates could be loyal, provided that the ruler commanded his subordinates according to the rites [8.14.41, 13.4, 3.19]. This means the ruler necessarily exerts a moral influence on those below him by practicing the rites as a nobleman of good will. As a result of his influence, the inferiors also behave sincerely according to the rites. This can be compared to the grass that must bend when the wind blows over it [8. 12.19]. An ideal ruler, who rules only through morality, needs no other political measures, techniques, or penalties. Confucius used an allegory of the North Star for this purpose. The North Star remains immobile in its place, and all the other stars orbit it spontaneously; analogously, the moral ruler stands in the leading place *without doing anything* (無為), and all those below fulfill the duties of their own accord [8. 2.1]. This is precisely Confucius' ideal of politics. One of the classical paradigms of this ideal is the legendary reign of the Holy King Shùn (舜) [8. 15.5]. Remarkably, it does not mean that the ideal ruler does nothing. Confucius meant that the ruler should at least choose people of ability and virtue as subordinates to help him so that the *inhuman* (不仁者) will either be corrected or move away from the state of morality altogether [8. 12.22, 13.2]. The selection of virtuous subordinates is also part of the ruler's moral influence. Shùn only had five men as officials, enough for him to put the world in order [8. 8.20].

Based on the above explanation, it can be seen that the ideal ruler is a pivotal point both for the theoretical linking of Dé-Chih and Lǐ-Chih and for the use of the thesis of moral politics in the feudal system. According to Confucius, the best way to order the world in all times was for the king to exercise rites. This was the case when the Tào was still in the world. However, if the princes practiced the rites belonging to the king, the world would begin to lose the Tào. Nevertheless, the world's order could last for at least ten generations. In the worst case, which Confucius encountered at the time, the ritual system is practiced by the *dignitary* or Shih (士) class, and then the order of the world lasts even shorter [8. 16.2].

Developments and Problems

Two directions of development of the moral politics thesis

Confucius' thoughts on moralized politics sound logical at first. After all, it is pretty difficult to imagine that such a utopia of morality, in which everyone behaves humanely, can co-exist with the political unrest. Moreover, history teaches us that the order of the state can only be temporarily guaranteed by severe penalties. The proto-form of the thesis of moral politics founded by Confucius can theoretically explain this situation. So, it is not strange why most Confucians are convinced that the unrest of the political-social situation can only be eliminated through morality. However, there is a significant tension within this thesis because it mixes the class

society of the feudal system with the ritual system of the Western Zhou Dynasty. According to Confucius, in order to coordinate the two modes of administration of Lǐ-Chìh and Dé-Chìh, which were based on different systems of norms, the value criterion of the ritual system was reduced to morality, and the ruler was required to behave under both systems of norms at the same time as a role model for his subordinates.

As the feudal system deteriorated even more drastically during the *Warring States period*,¹⁷ The more severe change in the political situation pushed the evolution of the thesis of moral politics even further. After Confucius' death, this thesis was developed in two directions by his successors, each of whom emphasized two poles of the tension mentioned above and thus regarded either the order of *the common good* or that of *prosperity* as their political goal.

On the one hand, Mencius (372–289 BC) advocated the *goodness of human nature* (人性善) and stated that people tend towards the good according to their nature [9] (VI A2). Thus, man should do nothing in the political sphere except to develop and fulfill his rungs of goodness, which are moral [9] (II A6). Accordingly, Mencius neglected the mediating function of the rites. He took the way of administration of the *earlier kings* (先王) – mainly Yáo and Shùn – developed from the moral sense as the criterion of ideal politics [9] (IV A1). A ruler who does not take care of the welfare of the people in this way is not qualified as a ruler [9] (I B8). On the other hand, Xunzi (荀子, BC) advocated the *badness of human nature* (人性惡), namely that people tend to fight with each other for benefit because of his innate desire. He further argued that man's desire should be restrained by the rites laid down by *Holy Kings*¹⁸ so that the world does not fall into disorder and everyone can be modeled for good [11] (23 (*Xing-è*)). However, as the rites necessarily change over time, Xunzi decides, given the diversity of the ritual systems, to adopt the ritual system originating from *later kings* (後王) as the most suitable method of administration for the society of the time [11] (5 (*Fei-xiang*)). This overemphasis on the function of the ritual system leads to a need for the autonomous power of morality. Therefore, in Xunzi's view, the ruler plays a vital role in ensuring the proper execution of the ritual system. Otherwise, no one can force the people to restrain their desires.

The Theoretical Contradiction Within the Thesis

The two development directions of the moral politics thesis still need to go beyond the framework established by Confucius. To a certain extent, the tension between Lǐ-Chìh and Dé-Chìh diminishes with the different anthropological views of Mencius and Xunzi. However, they retain the ideal ruler's model as before and

¹⁷ An obvious sign of the decline of the feudal system was that the feudal lords called themselves king one after the other in public.

¹⁸ The meaning of Holy Kings can be referred to: Xunzi, Chapter XXI (荀子·解蔽) [11] (21: “聖也者，盡倫者也；王也者，盡制者也；兩盡者，足以為天下極矣。”).

cannot recognize a difficulty hidden therein. The following argument can discover this inner difficulty of the thesis: (1) If the ruler behaves humanely, the whole people will also behave humanely under his influence, according to the thesis of moral politics. (2) As long as everyone can behave humanely, the state is in order. (3) Although every man is essentially capable of behaving humanely, it is not easy for him to accomplish the standard of humanity at all times, as Confucius admitted. (4) Since it is difficult to become *moral*, *moral ones* rarely appear in history, and it is even rarer to find a moral ruler. (5) Moreover, according to the same thesis, the ruler should avoid exercising the state's penalties. (6) Accordingly, in the case of the normal ruler, who acts not *humanely enough*, there is hardly any sanctioning power against the criminal. (7) Therefore, the order of the state in history occurs rarely and unexpectedly in the absence of the moral ruler or the state's power of sanction. (8) In comparison, the disorder of the state must be a normal and long-term condition. (9) Since the thesis of moral politics is considered a political view and a political view should be practical, this thesis, which depends on historical contingency, sounds quite useless and not very convincing to expert politicians.

The famous legalist Hanfeizi (韓非子, ca. 280–233 BC) had already made a similar criticism, basing on a kind of attitude of *Fǎ-Chìh*. He compared the political order dependent on the ideal ruler to eating first-class meat to satisfy one's hunger. One must wait a thousand generations for an ideal king like Yáo or Shùn to appear; then, one can enjoy the pacified order of the state for a generation. This is like someone not eating for a hundred days to satisfy his hunger with the tastiest meat briefly. But no hungry person can survive until his hunger is satisfied, nor can anyone live for a thousand generations before finally experiencing the utopia of morality [12] (40 (*Nan-shi*)). With this analogy, Hanfeizi profoundly explained that *authority* (勢) and *virtue* (賢) belong to different categories and that political order has to do only with authority. Thus, Yáo and Shùn can put the world in order, not because of their morality but only because they possess the authority of the ruler [12] (40 (*Nan-shi*)).

The Practical Contradiction in the Application of the Thesis

Employing Hanfeizi's explanation, one can see that the political cannot simply be reduced to the moral. However, Confucians were slow to understand this point, primarily until the last century, when the rule of the state no longer fell into the hands of the hereditary heir to the throne but was entrusted to a president chosen by the people as a whole. During this long period, the thesis of moral politics was never actually realized. Nevertheless, its authority had hardly been challenged since the Han period, when Confucianism was first considered institutional and ideological. The same thesis overemphasized the ruler's function and even stated that the morality of the ruler was a sufficient condition for a just political order. This is why the flattering courtiers often misused it to praise their emperor. This phenomenon rather shows that the Chinese outwardly complied with the thesis but secretly

resisted it and that the society of the Chinese monarchy, in a certain sense, returned to the situation of “*Ming Shi Bù Fú*.”

The complicated feudal system based on kinship no longer existed. Nevertheless, a simplified hierarchy still prevailed in Chinese society, which was stabilized by Confucian dogma, or the so-called *Doctrine of Rites* (禮教). For example, the Confucians increasingly emphasized unilateral duty and obligation in all interpersonal relationships. A person of lower rank – subordinate, son, or wife – therefore had hardly any rights in everyday life to criticize those above them – ruler, father, or husband. The former can only obey the will of the latter as the main axis, whether the latter behaves following morality or not. This dogma is called the “three main axes (三綱)”¹⁹. Although such rigid dogmas can consolidate the authority of the superior, they nevertheless cause inequality in society as well as the repression of individual freedom of will, which is considered an absolute condition of morality. Consequently, these dogmas in the name of Confucius paradoxically harm moral universality.

After Western civilization violently clashed with China with its military power, more and more Chinese intellectuals began to consider the distress and a way out of their traditional culture. At that time, they gradually attributed China’s political and cultural weakness against the West to Confucianism. For according to this anti-traditional trend, which Maxists and liberals mainly supported, the conservative dogmas of Confucianism still hindered the Chinese from learning science and democracy, which led to the strength of the West. Their criticism of Confucianism reached its peak during the *May Fourth Movement* (五四運動). At that time, they understood the Confucian “three main axes” not only socially as the “*man-eating doctrine of rites* (吃人禮教)” but also politically as a barricade against the constitutional state that had been realized in the West. Chén Dú-Xiù (陳獨秀, 1879–1942), an important leader of this movement, pointed out that the *teaching of the rites* emphasized a class-differentiated way of life, which contradicted the necessary prerequisite of the constitutional state: every citizen is equal before the law [5. P. 107–111].

The democratic style Fǎ-Chìh replaced Dé-Chìh as the “politically correct” motto in China at the time. The anti-traditionalists wanted to completely westernize the Republic of China and drive out all influences of Confucianism as the “enemy of China’s modernization.”

Conclusion

So far, the development of the Confucian thesis of moral politics up to the beginning of the twentieth century has been briefly stated. The thesis began with Confucius, who tried to establish a moral basis for Lǐ-Chìh of the Western Zhou Dynasty. His mixture of Lǐ-Chìh and Dé-Chìh led to the internal tension of his

¹⁹ The dogma is precisely this: „君為臣綱，父為子綱，夫為妻綱。”

conception. Thus, to overcome this difficulty, this thesis developed in two directions. Since the two directions saw monarchism as the only just political system, they failed to solve the problem. The introduction of the democratic system into China has brought new development opportunities for the theory of moral politics. In the early 20th century, a group of Chinese scholars who called themselves New Confucians tried to combine this theory with the democratic system for a new solution to its application problem. Dé-Chih is still the central point of this thesis. However, the legitimacy of Fă-Chih is also fully confirmed here. The New Confucians recognize a tension between Dé-Chih and Fă-Chih and understand it as a dialectical development. They initiated debates with Marxists and liberals at that time, and these debates were quite complex and have not completely subsided even today. The reform of the thesis of moral politics still faces a challenge that cannot be dealt with in the scope of this paper, i.e., How can the New Confucians arrive at any practical improvements with the theoretical explanation? Because the discussion is still alive, it is difficult to conclude whether the thesis of moral politics has reached its final development. In view of the complexity of the contemporary development of the thesis of moral political, we will discuss this issue in depth elsewhere.

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