

# Governing a Country by Means of Virtue, Like the North Star—Discussion about the Confucian's Thoughts of Governing a Country with Morals

Wenjing Lu

School of Chinese Culture and Communication, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

Email: xblu@imech.ac.cn

**How to cite this paper:** Lu, W. J. (2021). Governing a Country by Means of Virtue, Like the North Star—Discussion about the Confucian's Thoughts of Governing a Country with Morals. *Advances in Literary Study*, 9, 135-142.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2021.93015>

**Received:** April 20, 2021

**Accepted:** June 7, 2021

**Published:** June 10, 2021

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## Abstract

As the greatest thinkers and educators in ancient China, Confucius created the Confucian doctrine and most of his thoughts have still practical value at present. In this paper, one of his core thoughts “Governing a country with morals” is discussed mainly on the contemporary value and the way for practice. The analysis shows that we should absorb the good ideas such as “cultivate oneself”, “people-centered”. Some thoughts such as self-discipline of virtue and serving the people should be enhanced to the officials. The “rule of virtue” should be combined with “rule of law” to run a country.

## Keywords

Confucius, Governing the Country by Means of Virtue, Ren, People-orientation

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## 1. Introduction

Confucius is one of the greatest thinkers and educators in ancient China. He created Confucianism which deeply affected the development of Chinese history. The word and deeds between Confucius and his students were recorded by his students and later generations in the form of quotations, named “Analects of Confucius”.

Confucius set up the first private school in the history of China around age 30. He cultivated “seventy worthies and three thousand disciples” by the spirit of “never being contented with your study, never be impatient with your teaching” and “having an insatiable desire to, be tireless in teaching”. The whole society

was full of unrest during the Spring and Autumn period Confucius lived in. The ceremony system was destroyed. All of these made him painful and sad. He traveled through various kingdoms to propagandize his thoughts to those kings. Unfortunately, his thoughts were not adopted by any kings of that time.

At the beginning of “Confucius Analects Governance”, Confucius expressed his political philosophy by a vivid metaphor: “Governing the country with moral, like the north star in a certain position.” (Yang, 1980). What he wanted to express is that if a governor administers his country and people with morals, then he will be supported extensively by his officials and people just like thousands of stars surrounding the North Star. Accordingly, the society will be in good order. Thus Confucius thought the government by means of virtue was the central in running a country, and the benevolence (“Ren”) was the moral quality that existed in a person’s heart and could turn into practical behavior to benefit others. This kind of personality power is full of attraction, cohesion.

Later, the Confucianists, Mencius and Dong Zhongshu, extended the thoughts of Confucius to “Ren”, “Yi”, “Li”, “Chih”, “Xing”. Confucianists thought that all individuals should possess five major attributes. Ren (benevolence) means to love others. Confucianists thought that he who loves others is always loved by them, and he who respects others is always respected by them. This is the fundamental attribute that could make an individual into a person with Ren. Yi means proper conduct of human relationship, to put concern and compassion in the proper order and sequence of human relationship. Li means propriety, i.e., the proper context by which this order and sequence of relationship are carried out. Chih means wisdom, referring to a person’s awareness of the positive motifs. Having this awareness, a person can judge for himself whether a specific act is proper to human relationships. Xing means faith, being responsible for one’s own promise. Ren is the heart of a man, and Yi is his road. The Confucianist thought that a person could contribute to the development of the society only if he/she had these five cardinal virtues. These cardinal virtues should be the basic characters of a governor (Cheng, 2004).

In this paper, discussion will go on the Confucian thought “Governing a country with morals”. Three respects: what is the connotation of this thought, why it is worth to be discussed, i.e., the contemporary value of this thought and how to practice this thought are mainly analyzed and some suggestions are presented.

## **2. Connotations of “Governing a Country with Morals”**

### **2.1. “Cultivating One’s Virtue” Is the Premise of “Governing a Country with Morals”**

“Governing the country with morals” requires the governors and officials to strengthen the self-cultivation of the “internal saints”, to excavate the internal goodness of a man and to implement it in the practice of government. Confucius thought that a good governor should “hear much and put the doubtful points

aside first but not talk about immediately, cautiously talk about the rest sure points. In this way, he/she can make fewer mistakes; see much and put the doubtful points aside but not do immediately, even for the rest sure points, just cautiously do, which can decrease the regression of a man. If an official can speak correctly and do without regression, he/she can be a good official" (Yang, 1980). These are the viewpoints of Confucius on the behavior of the good official. Any governor wanting to run either a country or a city well should do correct things and speak correct words as many as he/she can. Chi Kangzi once asked Confucius: "What should I do to let the people respect me as well as be loyal to me?" Confucius replied: "Treat the people with dignity, then they will respect you; Show piety to your parents and kindness to your children, then they will be loyal to you; promote the good and teach the incompetent, then they will seek to be virtuous." (Yang, 1980). It can be seen that Confucius advocated to administrate a country by Benevolence and etiquette. The governors should be solemn, rigorous, and meanwhile full of filial piety. In this way, the people is willing to be close to and respect the governors and truly do good turns, and work hard. Confucius had travelled through all the kingdoms. Though he was not appreciated by any king of that time, but his theory, administrating a country by using "kindheartedness", became the mainstream ideology of the following feudal society.

In fact, even in modern society, the good moral quality is still the basic and the most important requirement of governors. A officer lacking of morality cannot be tolerated by people, because he/she is more likely to abuse the power for personal gains and so the people's interests will be eroded. When more and more officers become immoral, the government will lose the support of people.

## **2.2. "People-Oriented" Is One of the Cores of the Thoughts "Governing the Country with Morals"**

"Ren" is one of the cores of the "Analects". "Ren" means to love for the common people. Surely it means benevolence government, the highest political principle of Confucius. Confucius once said: "To rule a country with a thousand chariots, there must be reverent attention to business, economy in expenditure, and love for man, the employment of the people at the proper season." (Yang, 1980). That means, to run a country well, the governor must think highly of the morals, be particular about credit, love the general public, and do not waste money and manpower.

Confucius once said: "If the people is led by laws, and to govern them by punishment, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they are led by morals, and to affect them by the rules of propriety, they will have sense of shame, and moreover will become good." (Yang, 1980). It can be seen that Confucius thought punishment is compulsive and so cannot lead people to understand the reason to avoid committing a crime. Conversely, moral education can lead people to understand the reason that to commit a crime is ashamed and accordingly they will consciously abide by the laws and rules. Ob-

viously, moral education is more brilliant than the punishment. Surely, in the ancient patriarchal society, most of people lived in their birthplace for life, and all the people around were acquaintance, moral restriction had strong effects on their daily behavior. However, in modern society, population mobility becomes more and more easy and frequent. People are not familiar with the surroundings. Meantime, the connections and disputes among them become more and more. The law becomes more important in dealing with these problems than moral.

Confucius related the way of managing a family to the way of running a country. Someone addressed Confucius: “Why are you not engaged in the government?” He said: “What does the Shu-ching say of filial piety? ‘You are filial, you discharge your brotherly duties. These qualities are displayed in government.’ This also constitutes the practice of government. Why must there be that-making one be in the government?” (Yang, 1980). Confucius thought that governing a country is just like managing a family. Only the person who is filial to his father and brother, he has the quality to be a manager of a country. If a person is filial in family, his/her behavior has the function of enlightenment even though he/she is not an official. If the filial piety becomes the ethos of our country, the “benevolence and virtue” must be the main stream. Accordingly, the country can be governed mainly by only the morals and few punishments.

Surely, because the social structure is more and more complicated with development, it is not enough to govern a country by only moral. This is the limitation of Confucius’s thoughts of emphasizing moral but despising laws. In modern society, the rule of law is the powerful measure in governing a country, i.e., to regulate the behavior of people by the law system, though the rule of moral is still the important assisting measures which have the irreplaceable role in defending the main stream moral value system of our society.

In contemporary society, both the moral education and the law deterrence are important in government. On one hand, the governors should carry on the moral education to the people since their childhood. The morals should be the people’s intrinsic characters and so they do anything with virtues subconsciously. On the other hand, the governors should make appropriate law to restrain the people’s behavior. The government should propagandize the knowledge of law widely to let everyone in the country understand the scope and deterrence of law. Anyone transgressing morals should be condemned and anyone violating the law should be punished.

### **3. The Contemporary Value of “Governing the Country with Morals”**

#### **3.1. “Cultivate Oneself” and “People-Centered” Are Still Practical in the Contemporary Era**

Confucius’s thoughts of “Governing a country with morals” require the governor to strengthen his/her self-cultivation. Only if the governor makes his/her an example, takes a correct attitude, and calls on people by his/her noble character,

the people can be decent and stand by the rules and laws consciously. The society can be stable. Chi Kangzi once asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied: "To govern means to rectify. If you lead on the people with correctness, who will not dare to be correct?" (Yang, 1980). "When a governor's personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. Otherwise, even if he issues orders, they will not be followed."

"The morals of the governor likes the wind, while morality of the people like the grass. The grass must be got flattened if it is blown by the wind." (Confucius and Mencius, 1999). Therefore, the moral cultivation of the governors affects the general mood of the whole society. If a governor is evenhanded and self-discipline, he/she can play a role model for the subordinate official and the people, and the public administration will be clear and bright, the society will be stable. The society will then become what people want. Otherwise, no matter how good the administration system and laws are, they cannot be effectively carried out. It can be said that the moral level of the administrators is related with the rise and fall of a regime.

Putting people's interests first is one of the core ideas of Confucius's philosophy of "policy and moral". Confucius demanded "Ren" for those in politics. Fan Chi asked "Ren". Confucius said that "Ren" means "to love people". That means, to respect the people, and to "stand for oneself and stand up for oneself and reach for others (Analects Yongye)" (Yang, 1980). Only in this way can the people recuperate normally, live and work in peace, and society will be stable.

The thoughts of people-oriented management and serving the people become gradually the mainstream belief. People-oriented management means putting people's interests first. The law and institution are made after consulting people. The interests of the people are put as the first consideration during any policy making. The government must respect and serve the public interests, including the education, medicine and pension security etc. The governors and officials are public servants. People are the master of the country.

### **3.2. The Moral and Law Are Supplement Each Other at Contemporary Era**

In contemporary era, Confucius's idea of "Governing a country with moral" still has great significance in reality. With the rapid development of society, we have to face a large number of new problems. For example, though the legal system has been initially built, the laws are not fully knew and understood, especially in remote mountain areas and countryside. Thus the people in these areas often breaks the law. Sometimes those who understanding the laws still commit crimes for selfishness, so corruption still exists in many areas. All of these phenomena seriously damage the image of government. Historical experiences show that only a sound legal system and strict administrative management are not enough to govern a country. No matter how perfect the legal system is, it cannot be effectively implemented without people with high level citizenship and good moral atmosphere.

Therefore, the relationship of moral and law is one inside and one outside, one soft and one rigid. They are complementary each other and indispensable. In contemporary era, “ruling the country with law” is the basic national policy. However, advocating the price of moral is still of great significance (Zhang, 2002; Deng & Lv, 2017). Morals can regulate the criterions of the good/evil, beauty/ugliness etc. Education of moral can make a man to do correct and legal things consciously. The law forces people to behave within the boundary line delimited by the government. Therefore, the role of moral mainly regulates people’s behaviors by adjusting their internal spirit and the adjusting the scope is larger relative to the role of law. The role of law mainly controls people’s behaviors by external forces.

Moral can let not only the legislation but also law enforcement and law-abiding are all based on good will, which can avoid both the rule of man due to abuse of law and the impractical law. In this way, the country can have practical law to follow and as well as have criterions of moral to construct people’s internal spirit. The whole society will be a harmonious one.

“Government a country with moral” requires not only the governor but also cadres at all levels to implement moral politics during running a country. Meanwhile all members of the country need to have moral qualities. This is the demand of the times and also the need for the healthy development of society (Ma, 2019). It requires officials to pay attention to their own moral cultivation to emphasize the role of moral as an example. It is very important for our anti-corruption construction. That is why in all the countries the moral education is drew much attention. In China, the construction of spiritual civilization has been carried out for many years, and the effects are very good.

### **3.3. It Is Required to Select Persons with High Quality and Noble Characters to Administrate a Country Well**

Noble people respect their elders in families, care for their brothers and sisters, and love friends. In society, they can be “expend the respect of the aged in one’s family to that of other families; expend the love of the young ones in one’s family to that of other families”. More importantly, they are loyal to the country. If such persons are selected to be governors, they can play a moral demonstration role, and thereby guide people to respect moral and do goodness (Xu, 2007; Kong, 2017).

In the Qin and Han dynasties, the system for the choice of government officials has been developed which took the appointment and examination as main channels and the recommendation, deployment, recruitment and military reward as the auxiliary channels. This system was suitable for the state of absolute centralization. In the Southern and Northern dynasty, nine-rank system was formed based on the system of Qin and Han dynasty. In the Sui dynasty and Tang dynasty, the imperial examination system occurred and this type of system was developed in the Northern Song dynasty by getting rid of some disadvantages in the former systems. In a word, during the long feudal era, many kinds of

political and choice of government officials systems were built which can be the references of the choice of officials in the contemporary era.

At present, the civil servant examination is the main channel to choose government officials in China. The directors of all departments of the government are elected from these officials. In the examination and employment, not only the applicant's knowledge but also his/her virtue should be judged and the virtue should be put in the more important position. The choice system of officials must be compatible with the social conditions (Lan et al., 2019; Ma, 2017). In the West, the governors are elected by the people. The governors choose the officials. Thus theoretically only who considers the interests of most people can be chosen. Certainly, the selection methods for governors and officials will change with the society environment and people's demand at that time.

Therefore, only suitable mechanism of selection for governors and officials can ensure clean governance, improve governance efficiency, and maintain social stability to select persons with high quality and noble characters to enter the government departments. Conversely, if the selected officials are morally degenerated, corrupted, and power rent-seeking etc., it will tarnish the image of the government and cause serious negative effects. Surely, the process of selection cannot be simplified such as just by an examination or someone's recommendation. A period of probation is required to inspect those candidates.

First, the superior leaders should be noble and talent men. Second, it also requires the superior leaders to have the ability of discerning virtuous persons, have sound views of values and talents, and are able to discern loyalty, good, evil, beauty and ugliness. The incompetent officials must be fired and the excellent officials should be retained and promoted. As for the selected personnel, they must be continuously cultivated to improve their own moral quality. Government departments should regularly organize relevant personnel to study so that they can continuously strengthen the concept of "people are masters and officials are servants". They should remind them to be close with the people at all times and to take serving the people as their purpose (Wu, 2011; Lu, 2015). If a superior leader is a corrupt official or a narrow-minded bigot, the persons he/she selected cannot be noble and people-oriented men. The government consisted by such persons cannot serve the people.

#### 4. Conclusion

One of the Confucius thoughts, "Governing a country with morals" is discussed. The connotations and the inspirations to modern government administration of this thought are mainly discussed. This thought has still important practical value in practice at present. It not only played an important role in the feudal society for thousands of years, but also has important value in today's society. We should continuously absorb the essence of it, integrate it with reality and modern government ideas, carry it forward, use it for contemporary state governance, and promote social development. To realize it, to select persons with high

quality and noble characters is very important to administrate a country well.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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