

Confucian Governance by Virtue: A Study on the Benevolent Rule as the Core Political Model

Guizhen Liu¹, Yuanlongyu Li^{2*}

¹Lyceum of the Philippines University, Batangas 4200, Philippines

²School of Computer Science, Beijing University of Technology, Beijing 100124, China

*Corresponding author: Yuanlongyu Li, 24080307@emails.bjut.edu.cn

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Abstract: Confucianism emphasizes governance by virtue (De Zhi), advocating the ethicalization of politics and the politicization of ethics. This paper explores the concept of benevolent rule (Ren Zheng) as the core of Confucian political philosophy, tracing its development from Confucius to later Confucian scholars such as Mencius, Xunzi, and Dong Zhongshu. Confucius regarded benevolence (Ren) as the highest moral standard for rulers, believing that a virtuous ruler serves as a moral exemplar for the people, fostering social harmony and political stability. Mencius further developed this theory, asserting that a ruler's moral cultivation directly influences national governance and that only a ruler who embodies benevolence and righteousness can ensure lasting peace and stability. Xunzi emphasized the systematic implementation of moral governance through policies that benefit the people, moral guidance, and ritual norms. Later Confucian scholars reinforced the idea that political legitimacy depends on the ruler's moral integrity, which limits autocratic power and promotes ethical leadership. This study highlights the enduring influence of Confucian virtue-based governance on Chinese political thought and its implications for contemporary governance.

Keywords: Confucianism; Governance by virtue; Benevolent rule; Political ethics; Moral leadership

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1. Introduction

Confucian moral governance, rooted in the ethical teachings of Confucius and his followers, has played a pivotal role in shaping political philosophy and governance in China and beyond. Emerging during the tumultuous Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, this thought system sought to address the challenges of social disorder and political instability by advocating governance based on virtue, ethical leadership, and the cultivation of moral character^[1]. Unlike legalist approaches that prioritized strict laws and punitive measures, Confucian moral governance emphasized the ruler's personal virtue as the foundation of a harmonious and stable society^[2].

The development of this doctrine was significantly influenced by Confucius, who championed the principles of “ren” (benevolence) and “li” (ritual propriety), Mencius, who advanced ideas of “people-oriented governance” and the innate goodness of human nature, and Xunzi, who integrated moral cultivation with institutional structures. Over time, Confucian moral governance was institutionalized, particularly during the Han dynasty, and remained a dominant political ideology in China for centuries. It not only shaped the administrative systems of successive Chinese dynasties but also influenced governance models in East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Despite the transformations in modern political structures, the ethical dimensions of Confucian governance continue to provide valuable insights into leadership, social responsibility, and civic morality. The enduring legacy of Confucian moral governance reflects its ability to bridge ancient philosophical ideals with contemporary governance challenges, emphasizing the importance of moral integrity in political leadership and societal harmony.

2. The formation and development of Confucian moral governance thought

The thought of Confucian moral governance emerged during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, a time of profound political and social transformation in ancient China. The collapse of the Zhou dynasty’s feudal system, coupled with incessant warfare among states, fostered an environment of intellectual ferment known as the “Hundred Schools of Thought.” This period saw the rise of various philosophical traditions, among which Confucianism played a defining role in shaping the ideals of ethical governance. The increasing disillusionment with supernatural explanations for political stability and disorder led to a growing emphasis on moral principles and human responsibility in governance.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) established the foundational principles of Confucian ethical governance, advocating for the central tenets of “Ren” (benevolence) and “Li” (ritual propriety). He proposed that rulers should lead by moral example, emphasizing that a virtuous ruler who embodies Ren and Li would inspire the people to follow moral conduct voluntarily. His advocacy for “benevolent governance” (Ren Zheng) opposed tyranny and underscored the necessity of ethical leadership in achieving social harmony. Although his ideas were not widely implemented during his lifetime, they laid the groundwork for future Confucian thought.

Mencius (372–289 BCE) expanded upon Confucius’ doctrines, reinforcing the role of moral virtue in governance. He introduced the concept of “Yi” (righteousness) as complementary to Ren, emphasizing the unity of benevolence and righteousness in state administration. Mencius championed “people-oriented governance” (Min Ben Si Xiang), asserting that “the people are more important than the ruler”, a principle that prioritized the welfare of the populace over authoritarian rule. His belief in the “innate goodness of human nature” (Xing Shan Lun) further highlighted the role of moral education in cultivating ethical leadership and fostering social stability^[3].

Xunzi (c. 310–235 BCE) contributed a contrasting yet influential perspective by asserting that human nature is inherently inclined toward self-interest and requires guidance through education and rituals. His philosophy integrated moral cultivation with institutional governance, advocating a balance between “ritual governance” (Li Zhi) and “legal governance” (Fa Zhi). His emphasis on the coexistence of ethical norms and legal structures later influenced the synthesis of Confucianism and Legalism, shaping governance models in the Han dynasty and beyond.

The institutionalization of Confucian moral governance occurred during the Han dynasty, particularly

under Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE), who endorsed Confucianism as the state ideology. The policy of “excluding all other schools and honoring Confucianism alone” (Ba Chu Bai Jia, Du Zun Ru Shu) ensured the dominance of Confucian ethical governance principles in Chinese political thought. Over successive dynasties, Confucian moral governance evolved, influencing not only China’s administrative system but also those of neighboring East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

In contemporary society, the principles of Confucian moral governance continue to offer insights into ethical leadership and social stability. While modern governance relies on legal frameworks, the integration of moral education and ethical leadership remains essential in promoting civic responsibility and social cohesion. The legacy of Confucian moral governance thought thus persists as a significant intellectual and cultural heritage, bridging ancient philosophy with modern governance challenges.

3. The evolution of Confucian ethical governance

The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were critical stages in the initial establishment of Confucian ethical governance thought ^[4]. This era was marked by frequent social turmoil and the transition from a slave-based society to a feudal system. The flourishing of intellectual and cultural diversity, known as the “Hundred Schools of Thought”, provided fertile ground for the formation and development of Confucianism. The chaotic political landscape, characterized by incessant warfare among feudal states, led to a growing skepticism regarding the absolute role of deities in national governance and stimulated new reflections on moral principles. By the late Spring and Autumn period, certain feudal states sought to replace traditional moral indoctrination with legal governance, as exemplified by the casting of criminal codes in bronze by Zichan of Zheng and Zhao Yang of Jin ^[5]. This marked the initial debate between the principles of ritual governance (Li Zhi) and legal governance (Fa Zhi), further facilitating the emergence of Confucian ethical governance thought ^[6].

Confucius laid the foundation for Confucian ethical governance, with “Ren” (benevolence) and “Li” (ritual propriety) as its core tenets. He regarded ren as the highest virtue for rulers, advocating that “a benevolent person loves others” and integrating this principle into political life. Concurrently, Li functioned as an external behavioral norm aimed at maintaining social order ^[6]. Confucius emphasized that rulers should possess noble moral character and implement “benevolent governance” (Ren Zheng), upholding the principle of “virtue before punishment” while opposing tyranny. He believed that a state governed by ritual and moral education could ultimately realize the ideal of Ren.

Although Confucius’ ideas were not widely adopted during his time, the Confucian school gradually expanded in influence over time. Mencius inherited and further developed Confucius’ theories, advancing the doctrine of benevolent governance. He not only upheld Ren as the core principle but also introduced “Yi” (righteousness), emphasizing the unity of Ren and Yi. Mencius asserted that a ruler must possess moral integrity and govern through Ren and yi rather than military force. He distinguished between “kingly governance” (Wang Dao), which is based on virtue, and “hegemonic governance” (Ba Dao), which relies on power and coercion. He underscored the critical role of a ruler’s moral cultivation in national stability and the well-being of the people.

Mencius’ concept of “people-oriented governance” (Min Ben Si Xiang) was also a significant component of Confucian ethical thought. He proposed the principle of “the people are more important than the ruler”, advocating that “the ruler is of lesser importance, the state is secondary, and the people are paramount.” Additionally, he developed the “theory of innate human goodness” (Xing Shan Lun), arguing that human nature is inherently good, with moral development being shaped by education and environment. Consequently,

he emphasized the necessity for rulers to implement benevolent governance and educate the people to achieve social harmony and stability.

Xunzi, another key figure in Confucian thought, further expanded upon the ideas of Confucius and Mencius, emphasizing the paramount role of ritual in governance. He advocated the principle of “exalting rituals and emphasizing laws” (Long Li Zhong Fa), asserting that both moral cultivation and institutional regulation were essential for effective state governance. Unlike Mencius, Xunzi proposed the “theory of innate human evil” (Xing E Lun), contending that human nature is inherently inclined toward selfish desires and requires education and ritual constraints to be properly guided. His ideas significantly influenced the later integration of Confucianism and Legalism, laying the theoretical groundwork for the Confucian dominance in the Han Dynasty [7].

The ethical governance thought of Pre-Qin Confucianism not only shaped the political and social structures of its time but also provided a foundational theoretical framework for future governance [8]. Confucius’ advocacy of “benevolence as the foundation, ritual as the practice” (Ren Ben Li Yong) and Mencius’ development of the “unity of benevolence and righteousness” (Ren Yi Xiang He) became crucial theoretical pillars for state administration in later periods. The Han Emperor Wu’s policy of “excluding all other schools and honoring Confucianism alone” (Ba Chu Bai Jia, Du Zun Ru Shu) established Confucianism as the dominant ideology in ancient Chinese society [9]. Over successive dynasties, Confucian ethical governance thought continued to evolve and profoundly shaped traditional Chinese culture and institutional structures [10].

Moreover, Confucian ethical governance thought extended beyond China, influencing East Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. These nations integrated Confucian principles into their political and cultural systems, developing localized Confucian traditions. The Confucian emphasis on moral cultivation, social harmony, and governance by virtue had a profound impact on the political institutions, social ethics, and cultural values of East Asia.

In conclusion, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were pivotal in the initial establishment of Confucian ethical governance thought. The theoretical contributions of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi constructed the core framework of this ideology. Confucianism emphasized the moral cultivation of rulers, centered on benevolent governance, and advocated a governance model that integrated ritual and legal principles. These ideas not only shaped ancient Chinese political culture but also influenced the governance models of East Asian nations, becoming a vital intellectual heritage of Chinese civilization.

3.1. The fundamental connotations of Confucian moral governance

The Chinese character “德” (De) carries a profound and multifaceted meaning in ancient Chinese culture. Its earliest forms can be traced back to oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions, though its presence in the Shang dynasty was not particularly prominent. Scholar Xu Zhongshu suggested that the “彳 直” symbol found in oracle bone script represents an early form of “De.” Subsequent research has indicated that in its early usage, “De” encompassed meanings related to conduct and intention, gradually evolving into a concept associated with morality. The notions of “De” appear in the Canon of Yao (Yao Dian) and Canon of Shun (Shun Dian), which emphasize that a ruler must possess moral qualities to govern the world effectively. In these early texts, “De” refers both to general behavior and virtue. The Zhou dynasty’s ideology of “revering De” (Jing De) established morality as the foundation of political legitimacy, an idea that had already manifested in the early abdication system and the divine right of kingship in the Xia and Shang dynasties.

3.2. The development of De-based governance (De Zhi)

The concept of governing through virtue, or De-based governance (De Zhi), emerged in the early Western Zhou period. To consolidate political authority, the Duke of Zhou proposed the principles of “revering De to protect the people” (Jing De Bao Min) and “aligning with Heaven through virtue” (Yi De Pei Tian), laying the foundation for the De-based political system^[11]. Later, Guan Zhong identified rituals, propriety, integrity, and a sense of shame as the four essential pillars of a state, warning that the decline of ritual propriety would lead to national collapse. Similarly, Zichan asserted that governance must be rooted in De, regarding morality as the fundamental principle of state administration^[12].

3.3. Confucius’s theory of De-based governance

Confucius further refined the theory of De-based governance, formulating a threefold framework of rule by ritual (Li Zhi), rule by virtue (De Zhi), and rule by humane leadership (Ren Zhi). He argued that relying solely on administrative orders and penal codes might compel people to obey out of fear, but it would not lead to true moral transformation. Instead, through moral guidance and ritual education, people would internalize ethical norms and voluntarily adhere to them, achieving the ultimate goal of governance. He emphasized “governing by De” (Wei Zheng Yi De), insisting that rulers should lead by moral example, inspiring the populace through their own virtue to ensure long-term social stability^[13].

3.4. Mencius and the ethical foundations of governance

Mencius, like Confucius, underscored the centrality of morality in governance. He asserted that good governance must be built upon moral education, advocating that ruling through virtue (Yi De Fu Ren) fosters genuine public allegiance, as opposed to mere coercion through force. His theory of benevolent governance (Ren Zheng) posited that compassion and morality are the cornerstones of state administration. He emphasized that rulers must prioritize the welfare of the people, alleviate their burdens, and implement lenient policies to secure public support^[14]. Furthermore, he introduced the concept of “vast, unyielding moral force” (Hao Ran Zhi Qi), which refers to an inner strength derived from moral conviction, asserting that only through such moral confidence could a ruler effectively govern by virtue.

3.5. Xunzi: Integrating ritual and law in governance

Xunzi advanced the discourse on De-based governance by emphasizing the role of ritual (Li) in state administration. Unlike Mencius, he argued that human nature is inherently flawed and requires external education and regulation. Consequently, he advocated for a synthesis of ritual and law (Li Fa Bing Zhong), asserting that while morality inspires, legal frameworks are indispensable for maintaining social order. His doctrine of “exalting ritual and enforcing law” (Long Li Zhong Fa) proposed that effective governance should combine moral influence with rational legal structures to ensure a stable and orderly society.

3.6. The three dimensions of Pre-Qin Confucian De-based governance

The Confucian theory of De-based governance before the Qin dynasty can be categorized into three main aspects: People-centered governance (Min Ben Zhi Zhi): This doctrine asserts that the people’s interests take precedence over the ruler’s authority. Mencius’ famous proposition, “The people are the most important, the state comes next, and the ruler is the least important” (Min Wei Gui, She Ji Ci Zhi, Jun Wei Qing), exemplifies this principle. Benevolent governance (Ren Min Zhi Zhi): This aspect stresses that rulers must

possess a compassionate heart and implement moral education to cultivate ethical conduct among the populace. Rule by virtuous elites (Xian Ren Zhi Zhi): This principle holds that only individuals of exceptional moral integrity and capability should govern, ensuring a meritocratic and ethically guided administration^[15].

3.7. Later developments: Han Dynasty to Ming-Qing Neo-Confucianism

Xu Fuguan identified Confucian moral idealism as one of the most influential intellectual resources in Chinese culture, emphasizing self-cultivation as the pathway to moral governance. Confucianism prioritized righteousness (Yi) over profit (Li) and upheld benevolence (Ren) as the highest moral principle, advocating a governance model centered on De-based rule (De Zhi)^[16]. Confucian De-based governance integrates self-cultivation and public administration, requiring rulers to cultivate their own virtue first before governing the nation—a principle encapsulated in the Confucian maxim “cultivate oneself, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to the world” (Xiu Shen Qi Jia Zhi Guo Ping Tian Xia)^[17].

3.8. The contemporary relevance of Confucian De-based governance

Examining Confucian De-based governance provides valuable insights into its historical influence and modern relevance^[6]. As scholar Qian Xun pointed out, the Confucian emphasis on ethical responsibility and social duty continues to offer solutions to modern moral crises and interpersonal challenges. Although the rule of law has become the cornerstone of contemporary governance, moral governance remains essential in areas such as family education, social management, and leadership development^[18].

For example, in corporate management, a leader’s moral integrity directly impacts team cohesion and execution efficiency. In public administration, moral education plays a crucial role in enhancing civic awareness and reducing social conflicts.

4. Conclusion

Confucian moral governance, rooted in ethical cultivation and virtue-based leadership, has played a profound role in shaping governance models in China and beyond. From the formative ideas of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi to its institutionalization during the Han dynasty and its later evolution in East Asian societies, this tradition has left an enduring legacy. Emphasizing benevolence, righteousness, and the integration of ritual and law, Confucian governance sought to create a harmonious and ethically driven society.

Although modern political systems rely primarily on legal frameworks, the principles of Confucian moral governance remain relevant in contemporary discussions on ethical leadership, civic responsibility, and social harmony. Its emphasis on moral education, people-centered governance, and virtuous leadership continues to offer insights for addressing contemporary challenges in politics, business, and social management. By bridging ancient wisdom with modern governance, Confucian moral thought provides a valuable ethical foundation for fostering integrity, stability, and societal well-being in an ever-changing world.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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