

The Core Value of Pre-Qin Confucian Political Thought

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Abstract: Hsu Fu-kuan made in-depth research and analysis on pre-Qin Confucian political thought, and pointed that the rule of virtue of Confucian's humanism, with people's interests and needs as the standard of populism, and political protest spirit of virtue against position, which constituted the core values of pre-Qin Confucian political thought.

Keywords: Rule of Virtue; Populism; Political Protest Spirit

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Introduction

The core value of pre-Qin Confucian political thought is mainly reflected in fair and just political rule. It is the foundation of pre-Qin Confucian political thought and the source for the comprehensive innovation of Chinese political culture. Hsu Fu-kuan made in-depth research and analysis on pre-Qin Confucian political thought, and pointed that the rule of virtue of Confucian's humanism, with people's interests and needs as the standard of populism, and political protest spirit of virtue against position. Hsu Fu-kuan tried to separate the essence of humanism from the Confucianism that was distorted under the repression of the dictatorship after the Qin and Han Dynasties and connected with modern democratic consciousness to develop a new Chinese political culture.

1. Rule of Virtue

The rule of virtue according to Confucius and Mencius's thoughts are based on their fundamental trust in people and human nature. "Book of Songs, Elegance, People" have a sentence like that: "People are born by nature, and nature set laws for everything. When people master those laws, they will have the elegant virtue". Confucius agreed with this remark and once said: "The poet of this song know the process of pursuing virtue! There are laws for everything. If the rulers set laws with virtue, people will learn from them and have virtues themselves." In Hsu Fu-kuan's view, if rulers with virtue can be the good examples, then the people will readily follow them.

Hsu Fu-kuan pointed out that Confucius especially emphasized the role of rulers make themselves as examples and rule by examples. If the ruler can influence the people by virtue, then the people's pursuing of virtue is as natural and logical as wind. Here Hsu Fu-kuan also quoted a passage from the "The Great Learning" to illustrate the thoughts that if the rulers want to successfully rule the country with peace, they must respect the elders and show compassion for the weak. And then the pure and moral customs of respecting the elders and showing compassion for the weak would generate among the people, so that the rulers don't need to worry about achieving the purpose of successfully rule the country with peace.

Hsu Fu-kuan believes that in addition to emphasizing that the ruler should fulfill his responsibilities by virtue and morality, the rule of virtue also has the value of preventing the ruler from being too indulging, which is, inaction. From Hsu Fu-kuan's perspective, inaction doesn't mean that the ruler is idle or make no difference, but to not allow the ruler to govern the people with his own self-will and coercive means. The purpose of inaction is to realize autonomy of the governed, that is, to do things according to their own wishes, which is the basis of "only do what nature requires". However, although the governed can be "autonomous," they still need the supplementary action of the ruler, which although disobeys "only do what nature requires", the people are who dominant their life, and the ruler is only in the auxiliary position to guide people to achieve all the reasonable material and spiritual life requirements. In Hsu Fu-kuan's opinion, this is the true meaning of inaction.

2. Populism

Another core content of the pre-Qin Confucian political thought is populism. In ancient Chinese classics, there are expressions of populist thought. The “Grand Oath” in “The Book of History” records the oaths of King Wu of Zhou’s crusade against King Zhou of Shang. Among them are the words: “The God sees what the people see, the God listens what the people listens.” More clearly statements in “The Zhou, Histories of Countries” proclaimed like that: “The God favors the governed.” Hsu Fu-kuan pointed out that Mencius tried to completely reverse the political direction of the politics with taking ruler as the starting point and purpose. He revived and developed the tradition of populism in ancient China. He declared openly that “the people are the most valuable, the society is the second, and the king is the least.” Therefore, the pre-Qin Confucian political thoughts did not recognize the status of tyrants and corrupt officials in politics, nor did they recognize the status of a ruler who is self-centered. What governs the country is the people’s will. The legal status of the ruler and the people’s obedience to the governance of the ruler are actually a social contract relationship formed by the consent of the people.

Hsu Fu-kuan believes that Mencius clarified the dominant position of the people in politics, and that the ruler or the emperor was in a subordinate position. The country is not governed by the rulers, but by the people’s will. The people become the masters of the whole country. In this way, the government must act in accordance with the needs and interests of the people under all circumstances. Rulers must select wise officials, remove idle officials, and punish criminals according to the wills of the people, so that they can govern the country and be qualified as a ruler.

In the pre-Qin Confucian political thought, the measures to realize its thoughts of ruling the country by virtue and populism were to enrich the people and teach the people, that is, to make the people live and work in peace with moral education. And whether the Confucius or Mencius regard enriching people as important prerequisites for teaching people. But just enriching the people is not enough. The government must also educate the people for morality while caring the people. Hsu Fu-kuan believes that when moral education is popularized, the way of morality will grow and develop in the people’s mind, and legitimate and reasonable behavior will be reflected externally.

3. The spirit of political protest

The period where Mencius lived in was an era that have successive distresses as caused by continual wars, destitute people, jungle rules and moral turpitude. Mencius sharply criticized and protested against the rulers who caused these social disadvantages. He warned the rulers with a dreadful and victorious history of the rise and fall of King Jie of Xia, King Zhou of Shang, King You of Zhou, and King Li of Zhou as well as King Yu of Xia, King Tang of Shang, King Wen of Zhou, and King Wu of Zhou. If the people were tortured, too much, it would lead to the disaster of the country and the death of the ruler; or it will inevitably lead to the downfall of the country and put ruler at risk.

Hsu Fu-kuan pointed out that precisely because Mencius determined that the political power should be determined by the people, and affirmed the people’s right to resist the ruler’s tyranny and the right to revolution. King Xuan of Qi asked Mencius for his opinions on the exile of King Jie of Xia by King Tang of Shang and King Wu of Zhou’s crusade against King Zhou of Shang. He asked Mencius: “Can official murder his king?” Mencius replied: “The man stole the virtue called thief, and the man ruined integrity called spoiler, and the man who stole the virtue and ruined integrity is called the isolated. I only heard that Zhou of Xia, the isolated, was murdered, but never heard that a king was ever murdered by his official.” In Mencius’ view, anyone who corrupts righteousness and ravages the people is the object of the people’s crusade. Hsu Fu-kuan believes that since the ruler’s power is obtained based on the consent of the people and is the product of a contract, the people have the right to take back their power from the ruler who violates the contract.

Since the twentieth century, the academia often criticized Confucian and Mencius thought in terms of “the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues”. In this regard, Hsu Fu-kuan pointed out that the three cardinal guides came from the obedience theory of the legalist Han Fei-tzu, that is, officials should obey the ruler, son should obey the father, and wife should obey husband, which had never appeared in the pre-Qin Confucian political thoughts. In Confucius and Mencius’s thoughts, the relation of ruler and officials, father and son are the same in human relations. However, that of father and son is in an absolute relation, and that of ruler and officials are in a relative relation. Even a father-son relation, it is not a relationship of blind obedience. Confucius said: “If the ruler is not righteous, the officials can refute against the ruler; if the father is not righteous, the son can refute against the father.” The pre-Qin Confucianism regarded ruler-official relations as friend relations and believed that it could not be compared with father-son relations. Ruler and officials can have the friends-like relation. Although Confucius also “serve the ruler according to true rite,” he did not recognize the ruler is in the fixed political center, nor did he recognize that the ruler had absolute rights over his subjects. Therefore,

he adopted a teaching rather than an obedient attitude towards the ruler.

4. Conclusion

In short, Hsu Fu-kuan analyzed the pre-Qin Confucian political thought with the spirit of review and criticism, and pointed out that the “awareness of unexpected development” was the origin of the ancient Chinese humanist spirit, while the theory of human nature was the result of the sprout, growth, and long-term development of the humanist spirit. The rule of virtue of Confucian’s humanism, with people’s interests and needs as the standard of populism, and political protest spirit of virtue against position consist the core values of the pre-Qin Confucian political thought. However, the essence of humanism from the Confucianism that was distorted under the repression of the dictatorship after the Qin and Han Dynasties, which leads to that the Confucianism not only failed to develop the ideological principles of the “rule by law,” but also failed to set up the system to realize its political ideals. Hsu Fu-kuan separated the core values in the pre-Qin Confucian political thought from the oppressed and distorted Confucian political thought after the establishment of the Qin and Han tyrannical autocracy. This is an important prerequisite and significant first step for the comprehensive innovation of China’s political culture and is essential.

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