

Confucius' Political Philosophy

Confucius (551?-479? BCE), according to Chinese tradition, was a thinker, political figure, educator, and founder of the *Ru* School of Chinese thought.^[1] His teachings, preserved in the *Lunyu* or *Analects*, form the foundation of much of subsequent Chinese speculation on the education and comportment of the ideal man, how such an individual should live his life and interact with others, and the forms of society and government in which he should participate. Fung Yu-lan, one of the great 20th century authorities on the history of Chinese thought, compares Confucius' influence in Chinese history with that of Socrates in the West.

Confucius' political philosophy is rooted in his belief that a ruler should learn self-discipline, should govern his subjects by his own example, and should treat them with love and concern. “If the people be led by laws, and uniformity among them be sought by punishments, they will try to escape punishment and have no sense of shame. If they are led by virtue, and uniformity sought among them through the practice of ritual propriety, they will possess a sense of shame and come to you of their own accord” (*Lunyu* 2.3; see also 13.6.). It seems apparent that in his own day, however, advocates of more legalistic methods were winning a large following among the ruling elite. Thus Confucius' warning about the ill consequences of promulgating law codes should not be interpreted as an attempt to prevent their adoption but instead as his lament that his ideas about the moral suasion of the ruler were not proving popular.

Most troubling to Confucius was his perception that the political institutions of his day had completely broken down. He attributed this collapse to the fact that those who wielded power as well as those who occupied subordinate positions did so by making claim to titles for which they were not worthy. When asked by a ruler of the large state of Qi, Lu's neighbor on the Shandong peninsula, about the principles of good government, Confucius is reported to have replied: “Good government consists in the ruler being a ruler, the minister being a minister, the father being a father, and the son being a son” (*Lunyu* 12.11). I should claim for myself only a title that is legitimately mine and when I possess such a title and participate in the various hierarchical relationships signified by that title, then I should live up to the meaning of the title that I claim for myself. Confucius' analysis of the lack of connection between actualities and their names and the need to correct such circumstances is often referred to as Confucius' theory of *zhengming*. Elsewhere in the *Analects*, Confucius says to his disciple Zilu that the first thing he would do in undertaking the administration of a state is *zhengming*. (*Lunyu* 13.3). In that passage Confucius is taking aim at the illegitimate ruler of Wei who was, in Confucius' view, improperly using the title “successor,” a title that belonged to his father the rightful ruler of Wei who had been forced into exile.^[22] Xunzi composed an entire essay entitled *Zhengming*. But for Xunzi the term referred to the proper use of language and how one should go about inventing new terms that were suitable to the age. For Confucius, *zhengming* does not seem to refer to the ‘rectification of names’ (this is the way the term is most often translated by scholars of the *Analects*), but instead to rectifying the behavior of people and the social reality so that they correspond to the language with which people identify themselves and describe their roles in society. Confucius believed that this sort of rectification had to begin at the very top of the government, because it was at the top that the discrepancy between names and actualities had originated. If the ruler's behavior is rectified then the people beneath him will follow suit. In a conversation with Ji Kangzi (who had usurped power in Lu), Confucius advised: “If your desire is for good, the people will be good.

The moral character of the ruler is the wind; the moral character of those beneath him is the grass. When the wind blows, the grass bends” (*Lunyu* 12.19).

For Confucius, what characterized superior rulership was the possession of *de* or ‘virtue.’ Conceived of as a kind of moral power that allows one to win a following without recourse to physical force, such ‘virtue’ also enabled the ruler to maintain good order in his state without troubling himself and by relying on loyal and effective deputies. Confucius claimed that, “He who governs by means of his virtue is, to use an analogy, like the pole-star: it remains in its place while all the lesser stars do homage to it” (*Lunyu* 2.1). The way to maintain and cultivate such royal ‘virtue’ was through the practice and enactment of *li* or ‘rituals’—the ceremonies that defined and punctuated the lives of the ancient Chinese aristocracy. These ceremonies encompassed: the sacrificial rites performed at ancestral temples to express humility and thankfulness; the ceremonies of enfeoffment, toasting, and gift exchange that bound together the aristocracy into a complex web of obligation and indebtedness; and the acts of politeness and decorum—such things as bowing and yielding—that identified their performers as gentlemen. In an influential study, Herbert Fingarette argues that the performance of these various ceremonies, when done correctly and sincerely, involves a ‘magical’ quality that underlies the efficacy of royal ‘virtue’ in accomplishing the aims of the ruler.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius/>