

Article

Virtue, Benevolence, and Governance in Early Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Study of Confucius and Mencius

Jiaxi Wu*

Chinese Culture and Language, Faculty of art and social science, National University of Singapore, 119077, Singapore.

*Corresponding author: Jiaxi Wu, e1538691@u.nus.edu.

CITATION

Wu JX. Virtue, Benevolence, and Governance in Early Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Study of Confucius and Mencius. *Multidimensional Culture & Arts*. 2025; 1(3): 215.

<https://doi.org/10.63808/mca.v1i3.215>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 17 September 2025

Accepted: 23 September 2025

Available online: 12 November 2025

COPYRIGHT



Copyright © 2025 by author(s).

Multidimensional Culture & Arts is published by Wisdom Academic Press Ltd.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Abstract: This paper presents a comparative study of the political thought of Confucius and Mencius, focusing on the concepts of virtue, benevolence, and their implications for governance. Confucius emphasized virtue-based government, supporting self-cultivation, talent appointments, and the Mean theory in order to attain “effortless governance.” Mencius, based on the premise of underlying human goodness, established a systematic concept of “benevolent governance,” which expanded ren from ethical to political areas. He emphasized the necessity of maintaining people’s well-being, respecting public opinion, and expressing the concept that “the people are the most important element.” While both thinkers based their ideas on moral government, their methodologies diverged due to different historical settings.

Keywords: Confucius; Mencius; political thought; virtue; benevolent governance; Confucian governance; comparative study



1. Introduction

A political ideology is an ethical idea, principle, doctrine, belief, or value that explains how society should function, provides a plan of action for public decision-making, explains how society works, and offers a policy and cultural blueprint for society. Numerous political ideologies were developed in ancient China, including the theocracy of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, Confucius's "Li Zhi", Mencius's "Ren Zheng", the rule of law of the "Fa-Jia", Lao Zhuang's naturalism, and others (Li and Wang, 2019). Confucius, the renowned thinker known as the "Greatest Sage" and founder of Confucianism, focused on the Spring and Autumn period (Zhang, 2018). Besides Confucius, Mencius, revered as a "sub-sage," also fully carried forward Confucius's ideas and orthodoxy. Therefore, this paper will explore and analyze the political thought of these two Confucian figures from their respective perspectives. The changing nature of the Spring and Autumn period led to the emergence of many political ideas.

Chaos resulted from the decline of the Zhou royal family and the emergence of numerous satellite states (Guo, 2022). In the late Western Zhou period, the advent of iron oxen farming led to the rise of individual forms of farming; the privatization of land altered patterns of wealth and poverty; the decline of the nobility and the rise of commoners changed the social structure. To address these problems, the vassal states began implementing reforms to better govern their territories.

Furthermore, the active class of scholars became a breeding ground for political thought. The status of the "Shi" was originally between the nobles and the common people, but during the Spring and Autumn period, the decline of the noble class led to the rise of the "Shi" (Lin and Zhao, 2018).

2. The Political Thought of Confucius

The changing nature of the Spring and Autumn period led to the emergence of many political ideas, and Confucius's philosophy was undoubtedly influenced by the political situation of his time. Most of his ideas and concepts were responses to the chaotic political conditions.



In Confucius's philosophy, the concept of humanity or "ren" was significant, serving as the moral substance. Although there are many definitions of "ren" in the *Analects*—the record of Confucius's teachings and thoughts—they are not contradictory. Among all the definitions, the answer Confucius gave to his student Fan Chih provides the most direct and general description. In Yan Yuan, "Fan Chih asked about humanity. Confucius said it is to love men" (Chan, 1963, p. 40). Thus, "love men" can be defined as the fundamental meaning of "ren," extending to the love of children for their parents, as Confucius asked: "Filial piety and respect for elders—are these not the roots of morality?" (Xue Er). Additionally, "ren" can be defined as valorous ("The man of ren will be valorous" — Xian Wen), and loyal ("Let your bearing be reverent while at leisure, be politely attentive when handling matters, and be loyal to others" — Zi Lu). Zeng Zi, one of Confucius's students, summarized his master's doctrine as "Zhongshu," where "Zhong" means being concerned for others, and "shu" means caring for others' convenience. Confucius said: "It is the word altruism (shu). Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Wei Ling Gong). So, "ren" can be defined as a code of conduct or a synthesis of all moral qualities, despite its various definitions.

Beyond ethics, "ren" was Confucius's remedy for political turmoil. He asserted: "The epitome of virtue is to control oneself and return to propriety. If for one day one can control oneself and return to propriety, all under heaven will recognize one's virtue" (Lau, 1979, p. 112). Thus, the emphasis on morality or "ren" was closely related to Confucius's political view, placing morality at the center of his political thought. In Wei Zheng, he likened virtuous rule to celestial order: "He who governs by virtue may be compared to the North Star, which remains in its place while all other stars pay homage to it" (Lau, 1979, p. 11). Therefore, in Confucius's view, the ruler consolidates his dominion through governing by virtue.

Although virtue in Confucius's philosophy is closely related to "tian" (heaven)—as he said, "Heaven has endowed me with virtue" (Shu Er)—he claimed that "to practice humanity depends on oneself" (Yan Yuan). Thus, governing by virtue also depends on the ruler himself. Moreover, this "De Zhi" (governing by virtue) downplays the relationship with spiritual beings, as he said: "Devote oneself earnestly to the duties due to men, and respect spiritual beings but keep them at a distance. This may be called wisdom" (Yong Ye). This does not mean Confucius denied the status of



heaven or spiritual beings. Hence, Confucius's political views, emphasizing the ruler's morality, centered on the ruler's own moral effort.

This philosophy enables governance without directives: "The effect of this kind of political view is that 'the government is effective without the ruler issuing orders,' because the ruler's conduct is correct" (Lau, 1979, p. 126). He critiqued punitive approaches: "If the people are governed by laws and uniformity is sought through punishments, they will avoid them but have no sense of shame. If they are guided by virtue and uniformity is sought through rites, they will have a sense of shame and will reform themselves" (Lau, 1979, p. 11). Emphasizing the ruler's morality and "li" (etiquette), which predated him in the Western Zhou, Confucius rooted "li" in "ren": "If a man is not humane (ren), what has he to do with etiquette (li)?" (Ba Yi) (Lau, 1979, p. 25). Moral cultivation manifests in orderly conduct, allowing the ruler to influence subjects subtly: "If you desire good, the people will be good" (Yan Yuan) (Lau, 1979, p. 115). Thus, it is natural for people to observe etiquette, as an orderly life reflects their moral cultivation, which is influenced by the ruler.

Some scholars term this "wu wei er zhi" (governing by effortlessness) (Cheng, 2019). In Wei Ling Gong, Confucius praised Shun: "Could Shun be said to have governed without exertion? What did he do? He simply placed himself gravely and reverently on the throne" (Lau, 1979, p. 135). This echoes Laozi's Daoist view in the Dao De Jing (chapter 57): "I take no action, and the people are transformed of themselves; I prefer stillness, and the people are rectified of themselves; I am not meddlesome, and the people prosper of themselves; I am free from desire, and the people of themselves become simple" (Lao, 2001, p. 57). Laozi criticized intervention: "The more restrictions and prohibitions there are, the poorer the people become; the more sharp weapons the people have, the more troubled the state becomes; the more clever and skillful men are, the more pernicious contrivances appear; the more laws are promulgated, the more thieves and robbers there are" (Lao, 2001, p. 57). Moreover, in Laozi's view, harsh governance arouses people's dissatisfaction (Huang, 2007).

Nevertheless, there are differences between Confucius's and Laozi's concepts of "wu wei er zhi." The key difference lies in the phrase "placed himself gravely and reverently on the throne" in Analects - Wei Ling Gong. According to Cheng Shude's Notes on the Analects, the sentence "gong ji zheng nan mian er yi" means that Emperor Shun respected himself, cultivated virtue, and assumed the throne (Cheng,



2013). Aligning with “to practice humanity depends on oneself,” it does not mean the ruler does nothing in governing. Rather, Confucius meant that the ruler only needs to cultivate virtue and influence the people through it, without legislating. Thus, in Confucius’s political view, the ruler need only focus on self-cultivation.

Complementing self-cultivation (“xiu ji”) is “raising to office men of talent and morality” (“ju xian cai”), linked to human nature and education (Yao, 2020). Confucius observed: “By nature, men are nearly alike; but through practice, they grow far apart” (Lau, 1979, p. 167). He advocated inclusive teaching: “In teaching, there should be no distinction of classes” (Wei Ling Gong) (Lau, 1979, p. 135). Scholars excel and serve: “The student who excels in learning should take office” (Lau, 1979, p. 192), finding joy in application: “Is it not pleasant to practice what one has learned?” (Lau, 1979, p. 3). Merit, not class, guides selection (Pines, 2018).

This facilitates “wu wei”: In Tai Bo, “Shun governed his empire well through his five ministers” (Lau, 1979, p. 70). According to Zhu Xi’s explanation, the five ministers of Emperor Shun included experts like Hou Ji (in grain production) and Yu (in flood control) (Feng and Guo, 2004). Thus, Shun could govern the empire effortlessly with these talented officers.

Apart from “raising to office men of talents and morality,” Zhong Yong also records Confucius praising Shun’s governance: “Shun was greatly wise! ... He grasped the two extremes, found the Mean, and applied it in governing the people” (Legge, 1971, p. 388). In the Yong Ye chapter of the Analects, Confucius said: “The Constant Mean is the perfect virtue” (Lau, 1979, p. 61). Thus, in Confucius’s political views, governing the country with the Mean is also part of “governing by virtue.”

3. Political Thoughts of Mencius

As the successor to Confucius, Mencius said, “I would like to learn from Confucius” (Mencius, 2008, p. 110). His philosophy of benevolent government is closely related to Confucius’s benevolent thought and represents an inheritance, development, and innovation of it. He believed that “if the Son of Heaven is not benevolent, he will not protect the four seas” (Mencius, 2008, p. 75). However, there is a difference between Mencius’s and Confucius’s emphasis on “ren.” Confucius spoke of “benevolence” as the moral self-discipline required of every member of society, while Mencius focused on human relations in a specific sense—the



relationship between the ruler and the people—and discussed “ren” more in the context of the state. Moreover, the basic content of Confucius’s teachings on “ren” belonged to the realm of morality and ethics and was not yet a full-fledged political doctrine. Mencius expanded the idea of “ren” from ethics and morality to political thought, developing it into a systematic doctrine of “benevolent government.”

The main reasons for the differences between Confucius’s and Mencius’s thinking on benevolence were their different times and political positions. In response, Mencius no longer adhered strictly to ancestral teachings but discussed “ren” in general terms, seldom mentioning “rites,” and extended “ren” from ethics to political thought. His main purpose was to raise the banner of benevolence in political thought, though this banner was later misinterpreted and misused by rulers (Dai, 2003).

First, Mencius’s theory of the goodness of human nature argues that “all people have a heart that cannot bear to see others suffer,” also known as “compassion” for others’ afflictions, along with hearts of shame, deference, and right and wrong (Gong Sun Chou Shang) (Mencius, 2008, p. 42). These four hearts form the foundations of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Benevolence (ren) is founded on filial piety and kinship: “The substance of benevolence is serving one’s parents” (Li Lou Xia) (Mencius, 2008, p. 125). Righteousness (yi) comes from the “heart of shame and aversion,” which includes respect for elders and fraternal duty: “The substance of righteousness is obeying one’s elder brother” (Li Lou Shang) (Mencius, 2008, p. 121); “Respecting one’s elders is righteousness” (On Exhausting the Heart) (Mencius, 2008, p. 215). Rites (li) involve behavioral norms such as greetings and protocols, subordinate to righteousness as the outward expression of benevolence and righteousness: “Rites are the door” (Wanzhang Xia) (Mencius, 2008, p. 155). Wisdom (zhi) arises from the “heart of right and wrong,” enabling discernment.

Based on the theory of the goodness of human nature, Mencius proposed a political framework to change society and save the people: the kingly way of benevolent rule (Mencius, 2008). In the policy of benevolence, Mencius argued that providing constant production is essential, as a person without a regular income may lose moral values, break the law, and destabilize the country (Bloom, 2021). The government must first establish necessary industries so that production meets daily needs, preferably through the well-field system (Mencius, 2008; Ivanhoe, 2018). Additionally, Mencius advocated for lighter taxes in accordance with the principle of



“not violating the farming season,” opposed conscription, and promoted lenient penalties (Shun, 2019). He emphasized that benevolent governance should prioritize aiding vulnerable groups such as widows, widowers, orphans, and the solitary, while also protecting industry and commerce (Mencius, 2008; Chong, 2020).

Thirdly, Mencius posited that the people are of supreme importance: “The people are the most important, the state is next, and the ruler is the least important” (Mencius, 2008, p. 285). Here, “noble” refers to the critical role of the people; the rise and fall of the state depend on their support (Zhao, 2021). To win the people’s allegiance, Mencius stated: “There is a way to win the people: win their hearts, and you win them” (Li Lou Shang) (Mencius, 2008, p. 121). He further emphasized sharing the people’s emotions: “Those who rejoice in the people’s joys and sorrow over their sorrows will be rejoiced and sorrowed by the people in turn. He who delights in the world and worries about the world will be delight and worry of the people” (Mencius, 2008, p. 25). Mencius believed that practicing benevolent rule was fundamental to a nation’s prosperity and repeatedly asserted that “the benevolent are invincible” (Mencius, 2008, p. 55). This idea serves as a lasting critique against tyrannical governance (Sato, 2019).

Lastly, Mencius distinguished between the Way of Kings. The Way of Kings refers to the path of ancient sage-kings and represents Mencius’s theory of benevolent government, which focuses on protecting the people, exercising virtue, and benefiting the populace (Mencius, 2008; El Amine, 2020). It emphasizes moral authority and legitimate governance. In contrast, Hegemony entails “using force to subdue the people,” employing power under the pretext of benevolence and righteousness (Mencius, 2008, p. 60). Mencius championed the Kingly Way and opposed Hegemonic rule, advocating respect for true kings and the rejection of coercive rulers (Tang, 2020). He consistently argued that benevolent governance is invincible, reaffirming that “the benevolent have no enemies” (Mencius, 2008, p. 55).

4. Conclusion

Despite being separated by at least 100 years, Confucius and Mencius shared a political philosophy that emphasized virtue as a fundamental value (Chan, 2020). Confucius’s political thinking prioritized the ruler’s self-cultivation, emphasizing the need to “exercise government by virtue” and “raise to office men of talents and



morality” (Lau, 1979, pp. 11, 192). These tactics exemplify his idea of “governance by effortlessness,” which allows the ruler to govern efficiently without worry (Cheng, 1990). Confucius emphasized the ruler’s role in stabilizing his era’s instability (Fung, 2018).

Mencius, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of the people in the rise and fall of a state, an aspect Confucius overlooked (Mencius, 2008, p. 285). He recommended practical steps to improve society and help individuals, such as maintaining “constant production” and campaigning for lower taxes (Mencius, 2008, p. 7). Nevertheless, the political thought of Confucius and Mencius is not entirely suitable for today’s political situation and society. This is because the contemporary political context is very different from the time of Confucius and Mencius, as well as the political system. Most countries in the world today are governed by systems where leaders are chosen by popular vote rather than determined solely by the ruler’s virtue. Even if a ruler is morally good, they cannot maintain their regime if the people do not feel they benefit directly from the ruler’s policies.

In conclusion, the political thought of Confucius and Mencius was profound in its emphasis on virtue. However, for both their time and today, it remains highly idealistic.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: This research received no external funding.



References

- [1] Bloom, I. (Trans.). (2008). *Mencius*. Columbia University Press.
- [2] Chan, W.-T. (1963). *A source book in Chinese philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
- [3] Cheng, S. D. (2013). *Xīn biān Lúnyǔ jì shì* [New compiled annotations on the Analects]. Zhonghua Book Company.
- [4] Chong, K. (2020). *Mencius's moral psychology and theory of justice*. Springer.
- [5] Dai, X. F. (2003). Analysis of Mencius's theory of "benevolent government". *Journal of Suzhou Teachers College*, (3), 8–10.
- [6] El Amine, L. (2020). *Classical Confucian political thought: A new interpretation*. Princeton University Press.
- [7] Feng, D. W., & Guo, Q. W. (2004). *Xīn biān zhōngguó zhéxué shǐ (shàngcè)* [New edition of the history of Chinese philosophy (Vol. 1)]. People's Press.
- [8] Fung, Y. (2018). *A history of Chinese philosophy*. Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1952)
- [9] Huang, Y. D. (2007). "Tóng guī ér shū tú": A comparison of Confucius' and Laozi's thoughts on "governing by non-action". *Chuanshan Journal*, (1), 48–50.
- [10] Ivanhoe, P. J. (2018). *Confucian moral self cultivation*. Hackett Publishing.
- [11] Lau, D. C. (Trans.). (1979). *Confucius: The Analects*. Penguin Books.
- [12] Legge, J. (Trans.). (1971). *The Chinese classics: Vol. I*. Clarendon Press.
- [13] Pines, Y. (2018). *The book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of state power in early China*. Columbia University Press.
- [14] Sato, M. (2019). *Confucian state and society of legitimacy: The kingly way and the logic of hegemony*. Brill.
- [15] Shun, K.-l. (2019). *Mencius and early Chinese thought*. Stanford University Press.
- [16] Tang, Y. (2020). *Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese culture*. Springer.
- [17] Yao, X. (2020). *An introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge University Press.
- [18] Zhao, D. (2021). *The mandate of heaven and The Great Ming Code*. University of Washington Press.