

An analysis of traditional Chinese thought of “governing by moral force”

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Abstract. The traditional Chinese thought of “governing by moral force” emphasizes that moral education is the foundation of governing a country, and requires the rulers to set an example, be strict with themselves, be clean and honest, and establish a clean and self-disciplined image to win the trust and support of the people. “Governing by moral force” is not only the way to govern the country, but also the theoretical basis for building a harmonious society. It still serves as a reference for the construction of the Party conduct and clean government and the improvement of people’s livelihood in the new era.

Keywords: governing by moral force, rule the country by virtue, people-oriented.

1. Introduction

During the Shang Dynasty, people were superstitious about ghosts and gods, and religious and political were intertwined. After the establishment of the Zhou Dynasty, Duke Zhou closely linked “virtue” and “destiny” and continuously transformed the concept of mandate in the Shang Dynasty. Duke Zhou summarized that the fundamental reason for the downfall of the Shang Dynasty was the lack of moral character. Therefore, it was necessary to attach importance to the power of the people, as well as love and care for them. Therefore, Duke Zhou put forward the political proposition of “pursuing morality and protecting the people”, and advocated the governance plan of “being virtuous and cautious in punishment”.

2. The historical connotation of “governing by moral force”

“Pursuing morality” is not only Duke Zhou’s negation of the Shang Dynasty’ concept of destiny, but also Duke Zhou’s rational thinking on how to govern the country in the Zhou Dynasty. In the politics of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the concept of “virtue” required rulers to respect virtue, maintain integrity, and be diligent in governance. For the rulers, it meant ensuring that the people lived and worked in peace and contentment, fully expressing their strong people-oriented concept and distinct sense of crisis. “Protecting the people” means that rulers must care for the suffering of the people and never indulge in pleasure. The idea of “respecting virtue and protecting the people” proposed by Duke Zhou has had an important impact on Chinese politics in later generations.

2.1. Duke Zhou pioneered the model of “governing the country by moral force”

Governing by moral force began in the Zhou Dynasty. The political and cultural reform of Duke Zhou opened a new stage of the development of Chinese social politics and culture. Duke Zhou’s important contribution to Chinese political culture is the establishment and expansion of benevolence politics.

First, Duke Zhou’s political idea of “pursuing morality and protecting the people”. Zhou acknowledged that the fundamental reason for the collapse of the Shang Dynasty was the lack of “virtue”, so he put forward the political idea of “pursuing moral force”. The point of view of “protecting the people” is to emphasize the governor’s attitude toward the people, Duke Zhou believes that “governing by moral force” is to understand the people’s feelings, care about the people’s sufferings in life, regard the pain of the people as his own, and only in this way can the status of the ruler be stable as a rock. In order to achieve the purpose of “protecting the people”, the Duke Zhou put forward that the governance of the country must take morality as the core, and the ruler must “take the people as the

core”, which made the traditional humanistic thought have a profound change, that is, from the God-based thought to the humanistic spirit.

Second, Duke Zhou’s political concept of “being virtuous and being prudent in penalty”. In view of the cruel lesson of the Dynasty’s abuse of punishment and disorderly punishment, the Duke of Zhou also made a new exposition of the principle of punishment, proposing to make good use of law and punish by virtue, and combining “careful punishment” with “illustrious virtue”. Illustrating illustrious virtue means that the leader sets an example, strictly demands himself by moral standards, sets an example for the masses, and becomes a role model for the society. “Careful punishment” means that war and punishment should be treated with caution, do not start a war casually, do not easily implement punishment. “Careful punishment” reflects human’s respect for the law and shows that human beings constantly pursue fairness and justice. Duke Zhou’s outstanding political wisdom is concentrated in the generalization of various political ideas into rule by virtue, through the politicization, systematization and perfection of morality, formed a set of ideal political norms, and opened up a new model of “governing a country by moral force”.

2.2. Confucius’ practice of “governing the country by moral force”

Confucius clearly put forward the political concept of “governing a country by moral force” and stressed that the way of governing the country is “based on virtue”, highlighting the idea of governing a country by virtue. Confucius emphasized that the fundamental meaning of “morality” is that rulers must follow moral norms and take moral education as the purpose of governing.

First, governing by moral force is an important measure to maintain national stability. Confucius said: “He who rules by moral force is like the north pole star, which stays in its place and all other stars homage it.” This profoundly reveals that “rule by moral force” is the core idea of governing a country, the ruler must pay attention to the people’s livelihood, only the implementation of rule by virtue, can bloom the light of morality, can be supported by the masses. The ruler should also set an example by influencing the people and winning the support of the people through personal cultivation, to achieve the long-term stability of the country.

Second, leading by example is the essential quality that the ruler must have. Confucius said: “To rule is to make everything fit for its position. If you lead to make everything in position, who does he dare not so?” It follows that only when the ruler is strict with himself and behaves properly can he govern the country well. The ruler has set an example, and who dares not be right? Confucius regarded the process of governing the country as a process of moral education for the people, and stressed that the rulers must set an example and establish a good image, to win the support and trust of the people, and lay a solid mass foundation for the governance of the country.

Third, morality is the bond that maintains the relationship between the king and the subject. The relationship between the king and the subject is not a relationship of rights and restrictions, but a relationship of interdependence. The monarch must practice “benevolent governance”, treat the people with benevolence, rule the country by virtue, set an example, and do his duty, while the minister must serve the monarch faithfully, serve the monarch with loyalty and filial piety, and assist the monarch with wisdom. Therefore, it is necessary to achieve a harmonious and harmonious moral relationship between the king and the subject, so that both the king and the subject take the interests of the country and the people as the priority. The core of Mencius’s “benevolent government” thought is that the ruler must “win the hearts of the people” and “subdue men by virtue”. Li Shimin, Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty, carried forward the political thought of “governing by moral force”, stressed that the way of governing the country must be “people-oriented”, carried out benevolent governance, and enjoy freedom of expression. The idea of governing by virtue has had a profound influence on the later generations, and it reflects the people’s worries and the sense of worry.

3. The main characteristics of “governing by moral force”

As the old saying goes: “He who wins the hearts of the people wins the world.” Therefore, governing by moral force is closely linked to the people’s hearts, which is an important principle of governing a country. In the process of governing the country, the ruler must lead the people with noble moral behavior, to win the support and trust of the people, so as to lay a solid mass foundation for social stability. Therefore, today, we want to make a profound summary of the traditional Chinese thought on “governing by moral force”.

3.1. Moral construction is the foundation of “governing by moral force”

“Morality as the principal principle and punishment as the supplement” originated from ancient Chinese legal thought, emphasizing that the governance of the country should be based on moral education, supplemented by penalty, guiding people to abide by social norms and laws and regulations through moral education, and preventing people from committing crimes by means of penalty. Confucianism believes that morality is the foundation of people’s happiness and social stability, and law is only an auxiliary means of morality. It emphasizes the important role of moral education in maintaining social order and the necessity of penalty in maintaining social stability. “Moral force plays a critical role and punishment serves as supplement” is also the basic strategy of the wise rulers of later generations to govern the country. All generations of enlightened rulers have emphasized the importance of “moral education” and “governing by moral force”.

In traditional Chinese culture, moral construction is the key to political stability, because the monarch and officials must win the trust and loyalty of the people through moral construction to achieve political stability. “Morality as the principal principle and punishment as the supplement” emphasizes the importance of morality, which is seen as the cornerstone of social order and political stability. Therefore, the idea of governing by moral force emphasizes that monarchs and officials must abide by moral norms, and only by example can they lead the people to follow moral norms. The monarch and officials must set a moral example for the people through their own behavior and promote the moral construction of the whole society. In the modern society, we should adhere to the thought of “virtue as the principal and punishment as the supplement”, and maintain the social order through moral education and deterrence of penalty.

3.2. The politician is the main body of moral construction

Confucius said: “To rule is to make everything fit for its position. If you lead to make everything in position, who does he dare not to? The meaning of this sentence is that to govern the country, we must act correctly, and those who are rulers have set an example, and who dare not act correctly? This sentence profoundly reveals that the essence of politics is to maintain social stability and social fairness, so that people can live in harmony. Therefore, the rulers themselves must be honest, just and clean, to win the trust and support of the people, and promote social stability and harmony. This ancient motto is not only the moral standard of political behavior, but also the code of conduct of those who administer it.

For the government officials, they must behave themselves, and do everything right, so that they can play an example role. In addition to the use of legal and administrative means, leaders must also pay attention to their own moral cultivation and norms of conduct, and set an example to promote the development of the country and society. The government should uphold the fine qualities of fairness, honesty, diligence, modesty, inclusiveness and so on, set an example by example, select talented people, and get rid of corrupt officials, which is the core of the thought and practice of governing by moral force. The government officials should also pay attention to the people’s livelihood, care for the vulnerable groups, advocate the values of love, charity, inclusiveness and mutual assistance, and promote social equity and justice through concrete actions.

3.3. People-oriented is the core of thought of “governing by moral force”

The traditional people-oriented thought was reflected as early as in the era of tribal alliance. The facts that Shen Nong tasted all kinds of herbs, You Chao built houses, Sui Ren made fire, and Da Yu tamed floods, all reflected the sense of responsibility of tribal leaders to tribal members. The political practice of the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties is characterized as people-centered, such as the thought of “valuing the people” in the Shang Dynasty and “protecting the people” in the Zhou Dynasty. In the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the people-oriented thought was further developed. Mencius advocated that “the benevolent men love others” and stressed that rulers should treat people with “benevolence”. Mencius further explained the thought that “the common people are the most important element in a nation; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is lightest”, and stressed that the monarch should pay full attention to the subject status of the people. After the Qin and Han Dynasties, the concept of “people are the most valuable element of the nation”, “love and benefit the people”, and “let the people live and work in peace and contentment” became the dominant idea. The Qin Dynasty implemented “rule of law” and emphasized the authority and justice of law. The Han Dynasty implemented “governing a country by moral force”, emphasizing that the ruler should win the trust and support of the people with morality.

Ancient Chinese political thought emphasizes that the people are the foundation of the state, and the rulers should take the interests of the people as the foundation. Political power should be based on morality, take justice as the criterion, and must always focus on the aspirations of the people, respect their opinions, care about their lives, and must serve the people. The fundamental purpose of the state is to protect the interests of the people and promote their happiness. Only in this way can political power gain the trust and support of the people and the country achieve lasting peace and stability. In short, the ancient Chinese “people-oriented” thought has profound cultural heritage and political significance, highlighting the main position of the people, and still has important enlightenment significance for the political development of China today.

4. The contemporary value of “governing by moral force”

“Governing with moral force” emphasizes that leaders should govern with moral principles. Confucian culture is an important theoretical source of the thought of “governing by moral force”. Confucius systematically proposed “governing by moral force”, which gradually integrated into the feelings of family and country after continuous development, and became the lifelong pursuit of ancient Chinese rulers.

First of all, the idea of governing by moral force contains the creative spirit of “endless life”. Heaven and earth give birth to all things, all inclusive, selfless dedication, but without any complaints. Therefore, as the essence of heaven and earth, man should imitate heaven and earth, and man should have a broad mind and be kind to all things. Confucius put forward the Confucian thought with “benevolence” as the core, and today's leaders should treat the people with “benevolence”, maintain social order with “honesty”, listen to the aspirations of the people with “tolerance”, and handle state affairs with a “just” attitude, so that the people can feel fairness and justice, social harmony and stability, and sound development. This has fundamentally realized the “endless growth” of social development.

Secondly, the thought of governing by moral force embodies the benevolence thought of “taking the people as the foundation”. The people's will is the foundation of governing by moral force, and the rulers must take the needs of the people as the fundamental starting point and formulate moral governance measures in line with the interests of the people. The ruler should take the people as the mirror, often reflect on and correct their own shortcomings, constantly improve their own moral cultivation, guide the people with moral education, and make the people consciously abide by social norms. Today, the idea of governing by moral force still has important guiding significance, high-ranking officials' rights come from the people, therefore, the rulers must be honest and clean for the public, governing for the people, clean and self-discipline, hard work, the rulers to the people set up a moral list, play an exemplary role.

Thirdly, the thought of governing by moral force emphasizes the legal measures of “virtue is the principal and penalty is supplemented”. “Virtue as the principal and punishment as the auxiliary” emphasizes that “morality” is the basis of governing a country, and “law” is only a measure to assist morality. In modern society, we should pay more attention to moral education, cultivate the good quality of citizens, and formulate reasonable legal norms to unify law and morality. In modern society, we need to establish a perfect legal system to ensure the authority and justice of the law. At the same time, we need leaders to govern the country by moral force, uphold the principle of honesty, justice and love for the people, and serve the people.

5. The significance of the ideology of “governing by moral force” in the era

Although the Duke Zhou conceived the idea of cultivating the monarch’s inner morality, this idea was only in the embryonic stage and did not make a systematic elaboration. Confucianism believes that the ruler must be a person with high moral cultivation, and only those with the quality of this kind can be role models and influence the others. Laozi pursues inaction, Zhuangzi advocates freedom, Mozi stresses universal love, Han Fei talks about the rule of law, Zhu Xi attaches importance to the principles of heaven, Wang Yangming’s conscience... From then on, we advocate benevolence, attach importance to people, advocate harmony, and pursue great harmony. These ideas and concepts have gradually developed into the spiritual core of Chinese culture and become the common ideals and beliefs of the Chinese nation.

5.1. Moral cultivation, hard work

The Party conduct, clean government and improvement of people’s livelihood are the concentrated embodiment of governance by virtue. Leaders must bear in mind that power comes from the people, work hard, and truly work for the interests of the people.

First of all, moral cultivation is the basic requirement of leading cadres. Leaders should maintain their enthusiasm for learning political theory, combine theory with practice, improve their work ability, actively devote themselves to their work, keep up with the pace of the times, and acquire new knowledge.

Secondly, it is an important that leaders work diligently. Leaders dedicate themselves to lead the social atmosphere, take social responsibility, conduct in-depth grassroots investigation, research, face the difficulties of the people, listen to the aspirations of the people, and always share weal and woe with the people. Leaders always put the interests of the people in the highest position, constantly innovate and develop, forge ahead, and seek happiness for the people.

5.2. Educate people by virtue and cultivate their souls

Han Yu said: “The teachers, preach and teach to solve doubts.” With the development of the times, the content of “Tao” has gradually changed. Now, while criticizing and inheriting the traditional Confucian “Tao”, we are constantly enriching the content of “Tao” with the thought of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era, that is, the education in the new era should reflect the spirit of the times of “educating people by moral force” and “educating people by casting souls”.

“Educating people by moral force” emphasizes the importance of moral education. Teachers must stand in the times to play, love their jobs, down-to-earth, lead by example, willing to contribute, to maintain their own good image. Teachers not only impart knowledge, but also shape students' minds. In the classroom, teachers should clearly sort out the teaching content, combine the characteristics of the course and the value concept, and dig deeply into the ideological and political resources to achieve the silent education effect. Outside the classroom, teachers should impart Chinese revolutionary traditions, and actively cultivate students’ feelings of home and country.

“Cultivating the Soul” emphasizes the importance of spiritual education. In the journey of education, teachers bear the heavy responsibility of casting souls and educating people. Teachers should take love as the flame, light up students’ ideals, cultivate students’ sense of social responsibility, and enable

students to overcome difficulties when they face them. Teachers should be good teachers and helpful friends of students, stimulate students' curiosity with lively and interesting teaching methods, cultivate students' creativity with rich and diverse classroom activities, and cultivate more talents for the motherland with a high sense of social responsibility.

6. Conclusion

History has proved that only by virtue can the ruler lead the moral style and social fashion, thus promoting the moral consciousness of the members of society and the harmony and stability of society. Governing by moral force is not only a quality requirement for the rulers, but also a key way to achieve long-term peace and stability of the country. Through governing by moral force, we can win a clean and healthy social environment, enhance the credibility of the government, and guarantee the long-term peace and stability of the country.

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