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The People-Oriented Thought in *The Zuo Zhuan* (左傳)

Introduction

The Zuo Zhuan (左傳), as a combination of history book and classics, includes a variety of points worth of exploring, and one of them is the people-oriented thought'. Over the periods before the Spring and Autumn Period, there had been the people-oriented thought, but it became more developed during the Spring and Autumn Period. *The Zuo Zhuan* records the history of that period spanning 255 years, and many events related to the thought is clearly kept in the book, which provides rich materials for readers to observe the thought. From the record of *the Zuo Zhuan*, it could be found that in general the thought was applied in three aspects. The first aspect is about the qualification to be a ruler of a country, the second one involves the foundation of military actions, and the third one is to do with the meaning of offering ceremony. From the three aspects, it could be observed how the thought was applied in that period. The essay will try to focus on clarifying the application of the thought in the times and illuminate what the influence it has on the society.

The Thought of Caring People Was Viewed as the Qualification to Be a Ruler

In far ancient times, it was suggested that the power of a ruler was granted by the Heaven, which meant that a ruler had the highest status over all the people under his governance. However, during the Spring and Autumn Period, a clear sign was shown that a ruler should serve the people he ruled. In other words, having the thought of caring people was the very first qualification to be a ruler. The example was shown in the record of the eleventh year of the reign of the Duke Zhuang (魯莊公):

In the Autumn, there was flooding in the Song state (宋國). The Duke Zhuang sent an envoy to Song to convey his sympathy, saying, "Torrential rain poured down on your state and destroyed the crops, how could not I send my sympathy for you?" The Duke of Song answered, "It was me who was not respectful enough to the Heaven, so the Heaven brought the disaster upon my state. I am so sorry for causing your concern over my state." Zang Wenzhong (臧文仲) said, "The Song state may rise! Yu (禹) and Tang (湯) blamed themselves and their countries rose quickly. Jie (桀)

and Zhou (紂) blamed others and their countries collapsed not long after. Moreover, it corresponded to propriety that a ruler addressed himself as ‘gu’ (孤) when his country was under disaster. The Duke of Song had humble words and addressed himself in accordance with propriety, was not it the sign of the rise of Song!” Not long after, it was known that the answer of the Duke of Song was said by the Prince Yushuo (公子御說). Zang Sunda (臧孫達) said, “The prince is a suitable person to be a ruler because he has the thought of caring people.”¹

From the answer of the Duke of Song, it could be found that the words were humble, showing that a ruler blamed themselves for the disaster, instead of blaming others. When it became known that the answer was given by the Prince Yushuo, Zang Sunda praised that the prince should be a ruler as the prince had the thought of caring people. From the praise, it could be seen that having the thought of caring people is an important precondition for becoming a ruler. In other words, without the thought of caring people, a ruler is not a qualified ruler. A few years after the praise, the Prince Yushuo ascended the throne of the Song state, known as the Duke Huan (宋桓公), which seemed to prove the praise by Zang Sunda. However, before becoming a ruler, the Prince Yushuo was a younger brother of the Duke of Song, which meant in normal case the prince will not receive the succession to the throne. Afterwards, the prince ascended the throne in an unexpected military coup by others. The result is unexpected and seemed not to do with the virtue of the prince. However, from the description of *the Zuo Zhuan*, Zang Sunda’s praise contained a sense of prediction, and the prediction was based on an idea: those who had the thought of caring people might become a ruler. Even if it was not a prediction, from what has really happened, it was clear that *the Zuo Zhuan* placed an emphasis on the point: the key to serving as a ruler is the thought of caring people. Another example for the point is recorded in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Duke Xi (魯僖公):

(After failing in the war with the Qin state (秦) and became captive) The Duke of Jin (晉) sent Xi Qi (郤乞) to convey the message to Xialv Yisheng (瑕呂飴甥) that Qin had agreed to reach a peace agreement with Jin, and summoned him. Yisheng told Xi Qi, ‘When you returned our country, you can summon all the people in the capital to the palace, and award them in the name of the Duke. You can tell them, “The Duke said, ‘Although I have been able to be back, I have brought disgrace on the country,

¹ 左丘明 [Zuo Qiuming], 杜預 [Du Yu], 孔穎達 [Kong Yingda], 春秋左傳正義 [*Chunqiu zuo zhuan zhengyi*], Translated by myself (Beijing: Beijingdaxue chubanshe, 2000), pp. 279-280.

so please practise divination to let my successor Yu (圉) to ascend the throne.” Xi Qi did as told and people all cried. After that, the Jin state awarded the people public farmlands. Yisheng said to other officials, “The Duke did not worry about himself but only worrying about you, which was the greatest favour. How do we do in return for that?”...all officials were happy and then the Jin state started to reform the army system.²

This was an example of how a country became better after losing a war. The Duke of Jin was not a good ruler, but his officials Lv Yisheng and Xi Qi grasped the key to running a country and did it on behalf of him, which was ‘caring people’. Only by caring people could a ruler win loyalty of people and boost morale from the loss in the war. Similar to the case discussed before, a ruler should blame himself when a country is in a bad situation. Therefore, Lv Yisheng let Xi Qi tell the people of the country that the Duke felt ashamed of bringing disgrace on the country, which helped the Duke win the loyalty of the people. More importantly, Yisheng and Xi Qi awarded the people to show that the Duke thought of his subject before himself, so the people felt touched and boosted morale to get the country recovered from the loss. This could be said a classical example of achieving success from failure, and its key is ‘caring people’. If Lv Yisheng and Xi Qi did not do so, the Duke may not have a result as good as he has gained. Mencius said, ‘People are the most noble ones, the offering ceremony is in the second place and the ruler is the least important one.’³ From the saying, it could be seen that Mencius’s thought also placed the emphasis on people, which should be influenced by what had happened before his period.

Caring People Is the Foundation of Military Actions

The second point is about military actions. During the Spring and Autumn period, the war among the states were something often seen. *The Zuo Zhuan* recorded a great number of wars and there have been precious experiences in military actions for the reader to explore. One of the experiences lies in the people-oriented thought. From many records of wars in *the Zuo Zhuan*, it could be often seen that whether a ruler cared his people decided the result in the battlefield. In the record of the sixth year of the reign of the Duke Huan (鲁桓公), there is a classical example. The King Wu of Chu (楚武王) was going to invade the Sui state (隨國), and Ji Liang (季梁), an official of Sui, gave the Duke of Sui an advice to address the

² 左丘明 [Zuo Qiuming], 春秋左傳正義 [Chunqiu zuo zhuan zhengyi], p. 434.

³ 趙岐 [Zhao Qi], 孫奭 [Sun Shi], 孟子注疏 [Mengzi zhushu], Translated by myself (Beijing: Beijingdaxue chubanshe, 2000), p. 456.

situation:

I heard that only when a small country practises the Dao (道) and a big country is off the right path could the small one fight with the big one. As for the Dao, it refers to being loyal to people and being honest with divines. When the ruler cares his subject, it is loyalty. When the officer of the offering ceremony practises the service with real words, it is honesty. Now people is starving and Your Majesty is indulging yourself, and the officer of the offering ceremony practises the service with false words. In such way, I do not know how can we succeed in the battlefield...people are the master of divines. In the past, the sage kings all cared people first and serving divines after...now people are not in solidarity and divines do not have their master. Only the rich offerings of your own will not bring any good fortune. Your Majesty, please improve the politics and be close to your brother countries, which may help you be free from the disaster.⁴

From Ji Liang's advice, it could be seen that he emphasised 'people are more important than divines'. When people did not really live a comfortable life, however rich the offerings of a ruler, it is not meaningful because the rich person is only ruler himself, which will not make the country strong. *The Zuo Zhuan* put this sentence after the advice of Ji Liang, 'The Duke of Sui felt frightened and improved the politics, and then the King of Chu felt dared not invade the Sui.'⁵ It powerfully emphasised the importance of caring people in terms of military.

Another example is seen in the record of the fifth year of the reign of the Duke Xi. The Jin state (晉國) was going to annex the Yu state (虞國), and Gong Zhiqi (宮之奇), and official of the Yu state gave an advice to the Duke of Yu:

The Duke of Yu said, "My offerings to divines are rich and clean, so divines will protect my country from the invasion." Gong Zhiqi answered, "I once heard that divines only bless people according to one's virtue. The Zhou Shu of *the Shang Shu* (尚書) has sayings, 'The Heave only blesses those with virtue'. 'The offerings are not fragrant and the virtue is what is really fragrant.' 'The people serve the same offerings and divines only bless those with virtue.' Therefore, without virtues, people cannot live in peace and divines will not receive offerings. What divines value is

⁴ 左丘明 [Zuo Qiuming], 春秋左傳正義 [*Chunqiu zuo zhuan zhengyi*], pp. 200-202.

⁵ 左丘明 [Zuo Qiuming], 春秋左傳正義 [*Chunqiu zuo zhuan zhengyi*], p. 202.

only virtue.”⁶

The example is similar to the former case, emphasising that people is the master of divines, and caring people is the foundation of army forces. Only when a ruler care his people well could divines receive the offerings by the ruler. If a ruler do not care his people, no matter how rich and clean the offerings are, divines will not receive the offerings and protect the ruler. Although Gong Zhiqi connects the action of caring people and the offering ceremony, in terms of military actions, the key only lies in caring people. The Duke of Yu still had a superstitious belief to divines and Gong Zhiqi showed a practical way of thinking, which may outlines the difference between these two kinds of thoughts in that period. Although Gong Zhiqi had offered a good advice, the Duke of Yu did not receive it and finally brought an end to his country, which could be in stark contrast to the previous case.

Caring People Is the Meaning of Offering Ceremonies

Practising the offering ceremony is one of most important events in ancient times. During the Spring and Autumn Period, people seemed not as superstitious as the people before. From the record of the Zuo Zhuan, It could be seen that the people in that period focus more on the people in this world instead of invisible and intangible divines. In *the Analects of Confucius*, there is dialogue. Fan Chi (樊遲), a disciple of Confucius, asked about ‘being wise’, and Confucius answered, ‘If one can teach people how to be a good person and respect divines without being superstitious about them, it could be wise.’⁷ From the Zuo Zhuan, it may be seen where the Confucius attitude towards divines comes from. In the record of the thirty second year of the reign of the Duke Zhuang, there is an example:

In the Autumn, a divine came down on Shen (莘)...The divine stayed in Shen for six months. The Duke of Guo (虢公) sent Zhu Ying (祝應), Zong Qu (宗區) and Shi Yin (史嚚) to serve offerings to the divine, and the divine promised to give him a land. Shi Yin said, “The Guo state may collapse! I once heard, ‘If a country is going to be prosperous, the ruler will listen to his people. If a country is going to collapse, the ruler will listen to divines. As for divines, they are clever and are of great integrity. They will act by observing the people. The Guo state has done so much bad things,

⁶ 左丘明 [Zuo Qiuming], 春秋左傳正義 [Chunqiu zuo zhuan zhengyi], pp. 393-394.

⁷ 何晏 [He Yan], 邢昺 [Xing Bing], 論語注疏 [Lunyu zhushu], Translated by myself (Beijing: Beijingdaxue chubanshe, 2000), p. 87.

how can it get any land from divines!”⁸

From the example, it could be seen that the real meaning of offering ceremony consists in caring people. The key sentence is ‘If a country is going to be prosperous, the ruler will listen to his people. If a country is going to collapse, the ruler will listen to divines.’⁹ Therefore, without caring people, any offerings to divines has no meaning. Along with two the examples discussed above, the advice by Ji Liang and Gong Zhiqi respectively, it could be found that the people in that times had realised that doing the practical things can truly bring good fortune, and being superstitious about divines were not meaningful. This is not only for rulers but for everyone.

Conclusion

From the record of Zuo Zhuan, it could be seen that the governors during the Spring and Autumn period placed great emphasis on caring people. As a ruler, if one cannot care people, he lose the loyalty of people. In terms of military actions, without caring people, a country will not have a strong army to seek victory in battlefields. In terms of practising offering ceremony, without caring people, the ceremony will lose its meaning. Overall, the people-oriented thought reflects that the people during that times have more practical ways of thinking than the people before, which may be the natural development as time passes by.

⁸ 左丘明 [Zuo Qiuming], 春秋左傳正義 [*Chunqiu zuo zhuan zhengyi*], p. 342.

⁹ 左丘明 [Zuo Qiuming], 春秋左傳正義 [*Chunqiu zuo zhuan zhengyi*], p. 342.

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