

Session 9.

Political Ethics

Session outline

- Ming and Mandate of Heaven
- Government
- The People
- War and Just War
- **Question for Discussion:** Is Confucian teaching compatible to modern democracy?
- **Reading:** Peter Nosco: 'Confucian Perspectives on Civil Society and Government', in *Confucian Political Ethics* (ed. By Daniel Bell, Princeton University Press, 2008, pp.20-45) [B]
- Shaun O'Dwyer: 'Democracy and Confucian Values', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 53, No. 1. (Jan., 2003), pp. 39-63 [B]
- Hwa Yol Jung: 'Confucianism as Political Philosophy: A Postmodern Perspective' in *Human Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 / 2, Postmodernity and the Question of the Other (1993), pp. 213-230. [B]
- Benjimin Schwarts: 'On Government—The Realm of the “Political” in the Analects', in *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 103-117.

Central Questions of Political Ethics

- How to justify the Confucian state?
- What is the right relation between the ruler and the subjects?
- Are there any human rights that are fundamental to the Confucian state?
- How to govern the state? By virtue or by law?
- How to balance economy and morality?
- Is there any just war? Can violence or war be justifiable?
- How to realise world peace and reconciliation?

We will not be able to answer all these questions. Instead we will concentrate on the four concepts: mandate of heaven, government, the common people, War and Just War

1. Ming and Tian Ming

- The key question for Confucian politics is to justify a particular government:
 - where the right to govern lies? how to govern? why to govern?
 - In a modern context, it is related to 'democracy', administration structure, social contract theories, human rights.
- Confucian justification is not only political but also religious and ethical issue.
- It is dealt with through the theory of the *ming* or *Tian Ming*, the "Mandate of Heaven."

Ming in China

- Ming or Tian ming not only underlies the political courses in China but also influences people's attitudes towards life.
- Its powerful control of the mind and body in contemporary China can be seen from the survey results in 2005
- when 46.2% said they were under the control or influence of fate
- and 25.7% for Heaven and Mandate of Heaven in the previous year

Ming 命

- Ming originally means ‘life’:
 - ‘If a man remembers what is right at the sight of profits, is ready to lay down his life [ming] in the face of danger, and does not forget sentiments he has repeated all his life even when he has been in strained circumstances for a long time, he may be said to be a complete man’ (The Analects, 14:12)
- It then means ‘to order’, to ‘dictate’; ‘mandate’, ‘decree’
- In early texts, ‘ming’ (life) 命 and ‘ling’ 令 (order or command) by external forces are often expressed by the same character.

Tian Ming 天命

- In early Confucian texts Ming is frequently mixed up with ‘Tian ming’ 天命 to indicate that one’s life is from Heaven, predetermined by Heaven
- **Personal fate** (course of life) 命运 and the **destiny of the state** 国命 are inseparable.
- Ming and Tian Ming 天命 : the order of Heaven
- ‘When a thing is done though by no one, then it is the work of Heaven [Tian] 天; when a thing comes though no one brings it about, then it is decreed [ming] 命’ (Mencius 5A:6)
- **Ming** has a variety of ethical and political meanings: **cosmic order, personal fate, human destiny, and divine justification.**

(1) Cosmic Order

- Meng = The cosmic order or natural law of the universe:
- 'At fifty I understood the Ming of Heaven', the Order or Law of Heaven (The Analects, 2:4);
- Xunzi: 'Those who know the Order or Law of Heaven (ming) do not complain against Heaven' (4:6)
- 'Heaven' here is both personal or impersonal:
 - **Personal Heaven** as the **Lord or Being who gives direct orders**.
 - Mandate is therefore a decree: 'Though Chou is an old state; Its Mandate is new' (Mencius 3A:3)
 - **Impersonal Heaven** refers to **Natural Order**, and the mandate is the **Way or Natural Law**: 'Heaven does not speak' (Analects, 17:19).

(2) (Personal) Fate

- Ming =allotted span of a life; = fate
 - One of Confucius's students: "Life and death are a matter of Destiny [ming]" i.e. beyond our control [12: 5].
 - When praising his best student Yan Hui for his love of learning and for his intelligence, Confucius showed his belief in the personal fate:
 - ‘Unfortunately his allotted span [ming] was short and he died’ (4:3)
 - The reason for which humans cannot explain:
 - ‘Po-niu was ill. The Master visited him and, holding his hand through the window, said, ‘We are going to lose him. It must be Destiny [ming]. Why else should such a man be stricken with such a disease? Why else should such a man be stricken with such a disease?’ (6:10)
 - In an orderly society, ‘every living thing will have its allotted fate [ming’ (Xunzi, 9:21); ‘matters of death and life depend on fate [ming]’ (Xunzi, 28:8)

(3) Human destiny

- Ming is the **destiny of all human beings** and particularly of the **state**, predetermined by Heaven, which in turn **determines human** success or failure:
 - ‘It is Destiny if the Way prevails; it is equally Destiny if the Way falls into disuse. What can Kung-po Liao do in defiance of Destiny?’ (The Analects, 14:36)
- By knowing Destiny humans are able to ensure their moral progress:
 - ‘A man has no way of becoming a gentleman unless he understands Destiny’ (20:3)
- **Destiny is not subject to human wishes:**
 - ‘When something arrives though there is nothing that makes it arrive, then it is Destiny that does it’ (Mencius, 5A:6)
- Xunzi: Heaven determines human destiny:
 - ‘just as the **fate of men lies with Heaven**, so too the **fate of the state lies with its rituals**’ (Xunzi, 16:1)

(4) Divine Justification; Mandate of Heaven

- **Ming = The divine justification for a particular government.**
- While the Mandate legitimises the government, the ruler must prove to be worthy of it: In the *Book of Poetry*: ‘Long may he be worthy of Heaven’s Mandate, and seek for himself much good fortune’.
- In Mencius, **what Heaven mandates** is to **protect** and **nurture** the people. His criticism of the way in which ‘The lords misuse the people, going against the Decree’ (1A:4)
- If they do thing wrong, then **Heaven** would **withdraw its mandate**, and people can justifiably rebel against them

(5) Ming = The Right to rule

- Through the concept of Ming, Confucians develop a political theory of divine justification
- This is the 'right to rule'.
- The Confucian view is that *losing* the Mandate of Heaven as the right to rule would shortly be followed by the actual loss of power:
- *The Book of Poetry*:
- 'The descendants of Shang, exceed a hundred thousand in number,
But because God [Shangdi] so **decreed**, They submit to Zhou.
They submit to Zhou, because the Mandate of Heaven is not
immutable'

Heaven determines through its acts

- **A dialogue between Mencius and his student:**
 - Mencius: ‘The Emperor cannot give the Empire to another’;
 - Student: ‘In that case who gave the Empire to Shun?’
 - Mencius: ‘Heaven gave it to him’
 - Student: ‘You say Heaven gave it him. Does this mean that Heaven gave him detailed and minute instructions [ming]?’.
 - Mencius: ‘No. Heaven does not speak but reveals itself through its acts and deeds’ (Mencius 5A:5).

(6) Judgment of History

- The belief in the change of the mandate of Heaven underlies the way how the Chinese history was written.
- The debates on the cause of the Qin's failure in the Han dynasty paved the way for Confucianism to become the state ideology and its Ming or Tian Ming conception for historians to write history
- Beginning with the Later Han Dynasty (25-220), one of the first acts of a traditional Chinese dynasty was to commission an official history of the previous dynasty (in that case the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*).
- Such a history in effect becomes the certificate of legitimacy for the new dynasty, showing how the previous dynasty was first benevolent but then eventually lost the Mandate of Heaven, which means it was the obligation of the new dynasty to replace it.

2. Government

- Why to govern?
- **People are separated into different groups by practice:**
 - ‘human beings are close to one another by nature. They diverge as a result of repeated practice’ (Analects, 17:2)
- **The division of labour:**
 - ‘There are those who use their minds and there are those who use their muscles. The former govern; the latter are governed. Those who govern are supported by those who are governed’ (Mencius 3A:4)
- **Government is necessary to maintain social ranks:**
 - Xunzi: human beings are naturally separated into different ranks and groups. To make use of them, a good government must be in place.

Hierarchy and the necessity of governing

- Xunzi: government is needed for hierarchy
- ‘Where the classes of society are equally ranked, there is no proper arrangement of society; where authority is evenly distributed, there is no unity...just as there are Heaven and Earth, so too there exists the distinction between superior and inferior’
- If not it would produce contention. ‘Such contention is bound to produce civil disorder, and this disorder will result in poverty.
- The Ancient Kings abhorred such disorder. Thus they instituted regulations, ritual practices, and moral principles in order to create proper social class divisions. They ordered that there be sufficient gradations of wealth and eminence of station to bring everyone under supervision’ (Xunzi: 9:3)

The rule of virtue

- **Governing activities** are **equivalent to moral influence**:
- ‘The rule of virtue can be compared to the Pole Star which commands the homage of the multitude of stars without leaving its place’ (The Analects, 2:1)
- **Rule of virtue** will create lasting and virtuous life and peace.
- Confucius strongly **opposed** the **rule by penal codes** because ‘Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame’ (2.3).
- He praised **rule by virtue and rites**: ‘Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves’ (2:3)

Govern by example

- **Rule of virtue** is equal to the **rule by example**: when being asked about ‘government’, Confucius said ‘To govern is to correct. If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?’ (12:17)
- He advised the ruler: ‘Just desire the good yourself and the common people will be good. The **virtue of the gentleman is like wind**; the **virtue of the small man is like grass**. Let the wind blow over the grass and it is sure to bend’ (12:19)
- **Good government comes out of a good heart**: ‘What arises in the mind will interfere with policy, and what shows itself in policy will interfere with practice’ (Mencius, 2A:2)

Govern by trust

- Of all governing facilities and tools, Confucius insists trust from the people is central to the good government
- Being asked about governing, Confucius said ‘sufficient food, sufficient weapons, and the trust of the people’.
- ‘If one had to give up one of these three?’
- ‘weapons’.
- ‘Again’?
- ‘Food’.
- ‘Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the common people will have nothing to stand on’ (12:7)

Moral government

- The first is for the ruler to **set the right model**:
- ‘Raise the straight and set them over the crooked and the common people will look up to you. Raise the crooked and set them over the straight and the common people will not look up to you’ (2:19)
- However, **moral government is by education**, not by administrative orders:
- ‘He who practises good government [by orders] is feared by the people; he who gives the people good education is loved by them. **Good government** wins the wealth of the people; **good education** wins their hearts’ (Mencius 7A:14)

Benevolent government: Kingly Government

- Benevolent government: Mencius called the rulers to ‘govern the people like their father and mother’ (1A:4) and required them to ‘practise benevolent government towards the people, reduces punishment and taxation, gets the people to plough deeply and weed promptly’ (1A:5)
- Mencius also called it ‘Kingly government’, the government under the rule of King Wen: ‘Happy are the rich; but have pity on the helpless’ (1B:5)

Mutual responsibilities

- The ruler must first gain the trust of the people: ‘Only after he has gained the trust of the common people does the gentleman work them hard’ (Analects 19:10)
- ‘If a prince treats his ministers as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a mere fellow countryman. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy’ (Mencius, 4B:3)
- In contrast to the practice of unquestioning loyalty to the ruler in later China, early Confucians praised the remonstrating ministers: ‘When a father had a remonstrating son, then nothing in his conduct lacked ritual principle...if a minister merely follows his lord, how is he behaving with integrity? (Xunzi, 29:3)

Harmony between Ruler and Ruled

- A **state** is nothing other than **an enlarged form of family** and the relations between the ruler and the subjects, and between those govern and those who are governed are equivalent to the **relations between parents and children**.
- **However, unlike in the family** where children are held primarily responsible for dissolving conflict, **in the state the chief responsibility for reducing tension and solving conflict is laid on those who rule and govern**.
- It is a Confucian conviction that with a **cruel and immoral ruler** no state would be at peace, and only **humane and virtuous rulers** could bring the end to conflict and make the state prosperous and harmonious.

3. The People

- The Common people are of a lower class:
- People are naturally divided into different classes:
 - ‘Those who are born with knowledge are the highest. Next come those who attain knowledge through study. Next again come those who turn to study after having been vexed by difficulties. The common people, in so far as they make no effort to study even after having been vexed by difficulties, are the lowest’ (Analects 16:9).
 - The intelligent and the stupid cannot be changed: ‘It is only the most intelligent and the most stupid who are not susceptible to change’ (Analects, 17:3). Hence the need of the former to educate and guide the latter.
 - By this Confucius emphasized the necessity of educating and governing.

People are to be ruled and educated

- **Common people are to be employed:**
 - ‘When those above are given to the observance of the rites, the common people will be easy to command’ (The Analects 14:41)
- **Common people are believed to be of a lower intelligence:**

‘The common people can be made to follow a path but not to understand it’ (The Analects, 8:9)
- **The common people need to be governed:** ‘This is the way of the common people: once they have a full belly and warm clothes on their back they degenerate to the level of animals if they are allowed to lead idle lives, without education or discipline’ (The Analects 3A:4).
- As the **political rule is established on social stratification**, there is no need for democracy in Confucian politics

People follow the example

- Virtues of the common people are to follow the ruling classes:
- ‘When those above love the rites, none of the common people will dare be irreverent; when they love what is right, none of the common people will dare be insubordinate; when they love trustworthiness, none of the common people will dare be insincere’ (The Analects 13:4)
- however, people must be employed only in the right seasons (1:5); in other words employing people against seasons will bring disasters
- The virtues of the ruler demonstrate in his treatment of the common people: ‘in caring for the common people, [the ruler must be] generous and in employing their service, [they must be] just’ (5:16)

The State and the People

- **Common people are more important than the ruler:** ‘The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler’ (Mencius 7B:14)
- The ruler must practise benevolence in order to hold his empire:
 - ‘An emperor cannot keep the Empire within the Four Seas unless he is benevolent; a feudal lord cannot preserve the altars to the gods of earth and grain unless he is benevolent’ (Mencius 7:3)
- If the ruler does not practise benevolence and follow righteousness, the people have right to disobey and to revolt:
 - ‘If a ruler ill-uses his people to an extreme degree, he will be murdered and his state annexed; if he does it to a lesser degree, his person will be in danger and his territory reduced’ (7A:2)

The Confucian Doctrine of Revolution

- A king or an emperor who did not possess virtues, who treated his subjects cruelly, and who exploited the people to an unbearable degree was deemed to have lost his legitimacy to rule and to govern.
- The Confucian doctrine of 'revolution' is essentially ethico-religious, based on the harmony between humanity and Heaven,
- Revolution is believed to be a dynamic process of great transformation, which recreates harmonious relationships and renews the human mission to carry out the Mandate of Heaven on earth by removing the primary source of chaos and disorder from society.

Revolution in European Thought

- Comparing this with mediaeval European ideas about government, where the king (Pope, emperor, or whatever) often derived authority directly from God and was answerable only to God. There was therefore no right to rebellion in Western thought until the Protestant Reformation (which questioned the authority of Catholic rulers).

4. War and Just War

- Causing death, suffering and destruction was taken as one of the key reasons for the injustice of a war.
- **Confucius** opposed killing: ‘In administering your government, what need is there for you to kill?’ (12:19); among all necessary means for a state, he said arms and weapons could be given away (12:10)
- **Mengzi** condemned as grave criminals those proud of themselves as experts in military formations and at waging war, and called for that ‘those who are skilled in war should suffer the most severe punishments’ (4A:14).
- **Xunzi**: The lords who waged war to conquer other states were in stark contrast with the ancient sage-kings of benevolence and humaneness who shun from military campaigns.

World Order and War

- **World peace comes from virtuous ruling, not from violent war**
- Confucius: **virtue has non-action effect**: ‘If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action, it was, perhaps, Shun. There was nothing for him to do but hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south’ (15:5)
- Xunzi highly praised the Duke of Zhou (the 11th century BCE) that ‘by keeping his army inactive and giving his people rest, he demonstrates his affection and love for all the people (*Xunzi* 9: 19).

Benevolent Intervention

- A just war was said to be the one that brought happiness and benefits to the people and reduced, if not totally got rid of, pain and suffering.
- Confucians integrate their appraisal or acceptance of benevolent war into a metaphysical and religious blueprint in which ‘Those who are obedient to Heaven are preserved; those who are against Heaven are annihilated’ *Mengzi*, 4A:7
- When the social order of a particular state is broken where people suffer greatly and moral norms are in disuse, intervention would be necessary to restore peace and moral order.
- In arguing for the rightness of such a war as to save the people from suffering and to rectify disorder, Confucians deem ‘humanitarian or ethical intervention’ to be benevolent

Just War

- Violating the Way, having a bad character, abusing rites and ritual, ‘ill-treating the people to an extreme degree’ etc., a ruler would be seen as having lost his legitimacy, and should therefore be ousted.
- The war that is to overthrow a tyrant is just because it is aimed to ‘console the people and punish the guilty’ (Mencius, 3B:5), or can ‘prohibit violence and prevent harm [to the people]’ (*Xunzi*, 15: 2)
- The army that is entrusted with such a mission is called ‘the one of benevolence and justice’ (*ren yi zhi bing*).
- As soon as they arrive ‘from near and far people would come to offer submission’: ‘people who were nearby were attracted by their goodness, and those who were in remote regions longed for their justice’ (*Xunzi*, 15: 2).

War and Morality

- However, **Confucianism is generally more in favour of influence through virtue than violence.**
- Confucian masters preferred to bring peace and harmony to the world **by virtue rather than to secure peace by war.**
- For Confucius, the most efficient way to defend one's country against aggression was not to strengthen its arms but to **strengthen its own people's trust.**
- As far as the security and peace of a state were concerned, **trust from the people was the first priority, while food and arms were only the second and the third** (Lunyu, 12:7).

Harmony among States

- War between states is the most violent conflict and is believed to be the main cause of miseries and the chief destroyer of social harmony.
- The Confucian condemnation of war comes from its deep concern for people's life.
- To stop war, Confucian masters explored ways to reduce conflicts of interest between states, and sought to bring peace and harmony to the world by means of moral influence and the power of virtue.

Harmony in Political Life

- For Confucians, virtue is of political importance by nature.
- As the 'highest virtue', **harmony** is said to be necessary for the **peaceful life of individuals, the family and the state**.
- **Order and peace** must be cultivated internally and externally (obtaining a sagehood internally and a Kingdom externally).
- Harmony is suggested by Confucianism not only as a way of unify one's own body and mind, one self and other in all familial, social and political relationships, but also a way to resolve problem and conflicts among states.