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Discovering the Characteristics of Sage Kings and Lords in Ancient China from the *Book of Poetry*

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Professor Wang, Miss Deng, good morning. My name is Manyu Yang. Today I would like to share with you the topic on the characteristics of sage kings and lords in ancient China through reading the poems from the *Book of Poetry*.

The presentation is divided into four parts. Firstly, I will introduce some point of views of the monarchic system in ancient China and the *Book of Poetry*. In the following two parts, I would like to introduce you two poems, *Lingtai* 靈臺 and *Yi* 抑, in order to know how the virtuous leaders work in ancient China. Finally, I will sum up the presentation with a concise conclusion.

1. Introduction

China, same as many other countries in the world, used to be monarchy. During that time of reform and change in 20th century, Chinese scholars started to reflect on the disadvantages of monarchic system and attacked it. Some of the people felt the difficulties that the modern China has been encountering was caused by the this backward political system. However, this point of view is relatively biased when considering of the severe corruption of the late Qing government. When looking at the whole picture of the Chinese history, as Pines narrates, the political culture of ancient China should not be understood in ‘simplistic, monochromatic, or unilinear terms’.¹ It is fine to criticize the late Qing dynasty’s governance, but it is irrational to deny all the monarchic governments in Chinese history. In fact, the ideal monarchy is much alike the ideal governance even in nowadays. Huang Zongxi

¹ Pines Yuri, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 5

who lived in late Ming and early Qing has said, an ideal monarch should be someone ‘who does not benefit himself but to benefit all under heaven...hence he must be the most hard-working person among the country (不以一己之利為利，而使天下受其利……此其人之勤勞，必千萬於天下之人)’.² His ideas included in *Mingyi Daifanglu* 明夷待訪錄 which were spread by Liang Qichao in late Qing dynasty in order to introduce the democracy. It shows that the ideal governance is always similar no matter in ancient China or in the modern world.

In order to find out more about the political culture in ancient China, the *Book of Poetry* is a very good source. The poems recorded the customs, morals, and the governance of the country back in the Shang and Zhou dynasty. Daya is one of the sections. It includes 31 poems which are mainly about the events of the royal court. They are indispensable materials for people to know more about the kings and lords in ancient China. Next, I would like to introduce you two of them, and through reading the poems, to catch a glimpse of how the sage kings and lords were like, and what kind of characteristics they have. I believe we are going to develop another point of view toward the monarchy in ancient China.

2. *Lingtai* 靈臺 and the King Wen of Zhou: the representative of sage kings

When mentioning of the sage king, nobody will forget the King Wen of Zhou. He has almost been set as a symbol in Chinese history for later generations to learn from. Among the 31 poems in Daya of the *Book of Poetry*, there are seven of them directly related to eulogizing the King Wen of Zhou. There are two are about his son, King Wu and one is about his mother’s virtue. It is not accidental for the King Wen being memorable to his people and offspring. When looking into the reasons, the poems provide readers more chances to know about this noble leader.

The King Wen actually was not the king when he was alive. Before his son ended the

² Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, *Mingyi Daifanglu* 明夷待訪錄, to see Shiwei, *Mingyi Daifanglu* 世緯·明夷待訪錄 (Nanjing: Phoenix Press, 2017), vol.2, 5, translated by myself

Shang dynasty, King Wen was only the leader of a tribe, living under the rule of Shang dynasty. However, it was his benevolent governance won the popularity of the people, made a small tribe grew strong enough to end the powerful Shang dynasty.

Lingtai 靈臺 is one of the poems which reflect the benevolent governance conducted by the King Wen. It describes the process of the people building up ‘the marvelous tower’³ for him. The tower is built for the King to ‘observe the natural phenomena in the skies, to discover the fortune and misfortune, and sometimes to visit, to amuse and relax (所以望氛祲，察災祥，時觀遊，節勞佚也)’.⁴ It is encircled by a park which is called *lingyu* 靈囿. The character *ling* 靈 means ‘kind’.⁵ Yu Peilin comments, ‘The tower is called the marvelous tower, the park is called the marvelous park...The joy of the people are seen in these lines.’⁶ Animals like does and birds rest inside the park together with people who play in it, showing the harmonious relationship between the king and the people, the human and animals. The start of the poem reveals the process of building the tower which is interesting and enlightening. It says,

When he planned the commencement of the marvelous tower,
He planned it, and defined it;
And the people in crowds undertook the work,
And in no time completed it,
When he planned the commencement, [he said], ‘Be not in a hurry;’
But the people came as if they were his children.
(經始靈臺，經之營之。庶民攻之，不日成之。經始勿亟，庶民子來。)⁷

This section is important because it shows the key point of the benevolent governance of the King Wen. When he started to build the marvelous tower, he did not put a rush on it or

³ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV: The She King* (Shanghai: Huadong Shifan University Press, 2011), 456

⁴ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Shijizhuan* 詩集傳[The annotation of the Book of Poetry] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2011), 248, translated by myself

⁵ Zhu Shouliang 朱守亮, *Shijing Pingshi* 詩經評釋[The commentary and annotation of the Book of Poetry] (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng Shuju, 2017), vol.2, 739

⁶ Yu Peilin 余培林, *Shijing Zhenggu* 詩經正詁[The annotation of the Book of Poetry] (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 2007), 536

⁷ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV: The She King*, 456

push his people to devote for him. Instead, he was considerate of his people by telling them ‘be not in hurry’. It shows that how much he loved and cared for his people. Zhu Xi annotates, ‘The King Wen concerned about bothering the people, however, even though he give an order to ask them not to rush, the people actually enjoyed working for him like the son being willing to serve the father. They come naturally without being pushed (雖文王心恐煩民，戒令勿亟，而民心樂之，如子趨父事，不召自來也)’.⁸ This scene gives explanation to how Mencius suggest that ‘there should be righteousness between sovereign and subject (君臣有義)’.⁹

The imperial power is always related with dignity and authority. However, through reading this poem, readers can hardly connect the King Wen with a stern character. He is warm and sincere, hence the people repay their loyalty to this respectful leader. The last section record this scene by saying:

In what unison sounded the drums and bells!
What joy was there in the hall with its circlet of water!
The lizard-skin drums rolled harmonious,
As the blind musicians performed their parts.
(於論鼓鐘，於樂辟廱。鼉鼓逢逢，矇瞍奏公。)¹⁰

This section shows the joy of the leader and his officers getting along well. They enjoy this marvelous park together, without fear and tense usually surrounding when ministers serving the king. Yu Peilin says, ‘(This section) shows the King sharing the pleasure with everyone (是與眾樂樂也)’.¹¹ A Chinese proverb says, ‘to be in the king's company is likely to live with a tiger’. People today sometimes even feel anxious when they are with their bosses. However, the King Wen is merciful hence his ministers can feel completely relaxed and even joyful when stay with him. This description shows readers the power of

⁸ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Shijizhuan* 詩集傳, 248, translated by myself

⁹ The *Mencius* 孟子, to see Wu Guozhen 吳國珍, *A New Annotated English Version of the Works of Mencius* 最新英文全譯全注本：孟子 (Fuzhou: Fujian Education Press, 2015), 122

¹⁰ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV: The She King*, 457

¹¹ Yu Peilin 余培林, *Shijing Zhenggu* 詩經正詁, 536

benevolence.

3. The noble duke who is born in the State of Wei

Another good example of a noble leader is the Duke Wu of Wei who lived in the last years of the western Zhou dynasty. The Duke Wu is a virtuous person. During his life, he had experienced the two most famous tyrants, the King Li and the King You. However, as a vassal to the King of the Zhou dynasty, he managed to put his own land, the state Wei, in order in that chaotic times, and finally conserve his forces to save the Zhou dynasty in the critical moment. According to *Shiji*, ‘in the year forty-two, Quanrong, (which is the ethnic group from the west of China), killed the King You of Zhou, the Duke Wu of Wei lead his troops to help the imperial court to resist the Quanrong and made great contribution. After winning the war, the King Ping of Zhou confer the title of Duke to him.’¹² This victory has greatly improved the status of the Duke Wu in the Zhou royal court, but it did not make him relax. He is famous for being surprisingly prudent of cultivating his virtue, which made him quite the praise of gentlemen and common people. *Guoyu* records,

‘When the Duke Wu of Wei was at the age of 95, he was still devout and prudent to the government affairs, and said, “from the high ministers to the gentries, for whoever are serving in the court, do not tolerate me because I am old. You must be sincere and prudent, to warn me no matter day or night...” Hence he made the poem *Yi* 懿 to remind himself. When he died, his posthumous name was the Wise and Virtuous Duke Wu’.¹³

The *Yi* 懿 mentioned here, is a poem collected in Dayu of the *Book of Poetry*, which is written as *Yi* 抑. It is a long poem with twelve sections, which explicitly reflect the Duke Wu’s way of self-cultivation. The second section of the poem says,

‘What is most powerful is the being the man;—
In all quarters [of the State] men are influenced by it.
To an upright virtuous conduct,
All in the four quarters of the State render obedient homage.

¹² Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記[The Record of History] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2013), vol.5,1914, translated by myself

¹³ *Guoyu* 國語[The Analects of States] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1978), 551, translated by myself

(無競維人，四方其訓之。有覺德行，四國順之。)’¹⁴

These four sentences show that the main idea of the Duke Wu’s governance is to set a moral model for all the people. If the leader himself can stay virtuous and upright, then the people will not only be loyal to him, but also will be influenced in a good way. This central idea become the start of his strict cultivation.

In the rest of the sections, he wrote down the regulations which are mainly about three aspects, the behaviours, personal speech and intention. For the behaviours, he asks himself to ‘Rise early and go to bed late, Sprinkle and sweep your court-yard;— So as to be a pattern to the people (夙興夜寐，灑掃庭內，維民之章).’¹⁵ From the macro perspective, he values on ‘Having in good order your chariots and horses, Your bows and arrows, and [other] weapons of war (修爾車馬，弓矢戎兵).’¹⁶ This is to warn himself to be prepared for danger in the peaceful times. From these lines, readers can truly feel that the Duke Wu’s daily life is certainly different from the typical impression of an imperial member——being indulged with privileges or living on squeezing the people. On the contrary, he understood his responsibility and always wished to devote himself to the country and the people.

On the other hand, the Duke Wu’s cultivation are very strict on two aspects which are the personal speech and even the intention. The poem says,

‘Be cautious of what you say;
.....
A flaw in a mace of white jade
May be ground away;
But for a flaw in speech
Nothing can be done.
.....
Do not speak lightly;—your words are your own:—
Do not say, “This is of little importance.”
No one can hold my tongue for me;
Words are not to be cast away.

¹⁴ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV: The She King*, 511

¹⁵ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV: The She King*, 512

¹⁶ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV: The She King*, 513

(慎爾出話……白圭之玷，尚可磨也。斯言之玷，不可為也……無易由言，不曰苟矣。莫捫朕舌，言不可逝矣)'.¹⁷

These are a part of the lines which describe the regulation of speech which a leader should follow. For his intention, he asks himself to 'Committing no excess, doing nothing injurious (不僭不賊)'.¹⁸ Do not think of things which is out of one's own duty, and never intend to hurt anyone. Being kind and humane is the bottom line of a person who is in high position. After listing the rules of cultivation, he repeated two times in the last three sections to ask himself be patient and cautious of what this poem talking about, because these are all the rules of keeping a country safe and long lasting. Xu Qian says, 'The reason for the Duke Wu can approach the virtue of sages, is his attitude of willing to receive instructions and advices (所以工夫能及於聖賢者，乃受教聽言之功)'.¹⁹ The modesty and persistence of the Duke Wu shown in this poem touch readers' hearts, and also reflect the true image of a virtuous leader in ancient China.

4. Conclusion

To summarize, among the long history of monarchy politics in ancient China, the governance of the country does not always stay the same, and it is depend on the morality of the leaders and their ministers. However, the ideology of the ancient Chinese suggest that a qualified leader should be selfless and benevolent. He is never the person who can simply sit back and enjoy the worshipping from his people, but the one who must keep being cautious and conscientious to devote for the country. A Chinese proverb says, 'the water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up'. If the monarch does not think of his people, then the royal court is hard to escape from the destruction. It is the unchanging principle in the monarchy times, that only when the monarch cares for the people, the country can stay safe

¹⁷ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV: The She King*, 513

¹⁸ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics IV: The She King*, 515

¹⁹ Xu Qian 許謙, *Shijizhuan Mingwuchao* 詩集傳名物鈔[Commentary of the Book of Poetry and the Names and Subjects], to see *Xu Qian Ji* 許謙集[Collected Works of Xu Qian](Hangzhou: Zhejiang Guji Press, 2014), vol.2, 674

and peaceful. Just like the the two benevolent kings mentioned above, their morality can not only defeat a corrupt government, but also save the country in critical times.

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