

## **Socio-Political thoughts of Confucius: A Critique**

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### **Abstract;**

The article encapsulates the main and most distinguished features of Confucius' socio-political thoughts. Furthermore, it also covers socio-cultural as well as political changes of the era in which Confucius developed and devised his philosophical approaches regarding various societal, ethical, religious and political aspects. The article is an endeavor to demarcate and distinguish Confucius thoughts with the relevance of international standards of morality and cultural relativism with the modern political scenario of the world. . Examining post scientific changes, the article provides most credible account of inspiration for those who want to regenerate and reinterpret Confucius' philosophical doctrines to attain and sustain prosperity, stability and self-satisfaction living in the recent time.

**Keyword:** Confucius, socio-political thoughts, cultural relativism, reinterpretation of Confucianism, philosophical doctrine.

### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

Confucius (September 28, 551 BC – 479 BC) was a great Chinese thinker, philosopher, religious leader, ethicist and social scientist of the spring and autumn period of Chinese history. He was born in the district of Zou near present-day Qufu<sup>1</sup>, China. The territory was controlled by the kings of Zhou. Written during the 4th century BC, a time of great upheaval in China, the sayings of Confucius offer both a profound philosophic insight into the thought, ideas and morals of the thinkers of the era as well as a history of ancient Chinese society. References to fierce battles and intrigues between dukes and kings are homage to the conflict which characterized the era in which Confucianist philosophy was born. (Confucius, 2016)

The article is an endeavor to develop a comprehensive critique on Confucius' socio-political thoughts by keeping an eye over the current political and social developments. Divergent dynamics of Confucianism which lead to address the current socio-political residual

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<sup>1</sup> Qufu Chinese is a city in southwestern Shandong Province, near the eastern coast of China.

challenges of the world are the significant points in the article. The post scientific political patterns of the world are facing a junk of problems which impede the protection of fundamental rights of masses. Confucius socio-political thoughts can assist current political spectrums to address these issues.

Confucius opened his eyes in a malicious and appalling environment. At that time, the Chinese community was embedded in social disorder, bloody conflicts, poverty, wars, political instability and such type of other knotty challenges. Peoples were sweltering at the hands of their rulers who were running their empires with scrupulous attitudes. Looking over the deplorable situation, Confucius presented his thoughts, and made efforts to disseminate his teachings to curb the situation. Confucius is one of the great figures in the history of human thought, a pioneering educator, social critic, and political scientist. As a philosopher and teacher, he addressed core human issues with such precision and clarity that his sayings have been preserved and studied over thousands of years. The Analects of Confucius are a basic source for a wide range of advice on human affairs from governing nations and managing enterprises to dealing with society and getting along with others. (Cleary, 1998)

Confucius devised his own methods by using his rational faculty just to reduce pains and sufferings of human beings. In order to live a happy life, he introduced some basic principles of morality and collectivism<sup>2</sup>. People rushed towards his ideas, particularly after the Han Dynasty<sup>3</sup>. The dynasty adopted and included his teachings in the national curriculum. After a long time, Confucianism became famous throughout the world, and people accepted it as a school of thought in various countries. In China, Confucius' teachings have gained a religious status.

### **An Analysis of Confucianism**

**Function of Government:** Confucius presents his notions over the question of how a government should function. People are subordinate to their ruler, and every person from the society is supposed to live with the demarcated rules and laws of the ruler. People will have to follow their ruler and they will accept the ruler's self-control authority.

This is meant by 'To rightly govern the state, it is necessary first to regulate one's own family.' One cannot instruct others who cannot instruct his own children. Without going beyond the family, the prince may learn all the lessons of statecraft, filial piety by which the sovereign is also served, fraternal submission by which older men and superiors are also served, kindness by which also the common people should be ministered unto ( Miles Menander Dawson, 1915)

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<sup>2</sup>The theory and practice of the ownership of land and the means of production by the people or the state.

<sup>3</sup> The Han dynasty was the second imperial dynasty of China (206 BC–220 AD), preceded by the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) and succeeded by the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 AD).

The passage from Confucius' Analects elucidates his approach over functions of government. When a ruler's conducts and actions are right, his subordinates -public- will imitate his life style. What the ruler does, the people will follow.

He further enunciates that every person of a society should work within the domain of their responsibilities, and there should no intervention in others' duties and affairs from ruler. Shedding light over the proper function of a government, he says, "Husband and wife have their separate functions; between father and son there should be affection; between ruler and minister there should be strict application to their respective duties. If these three relations be rightly discharged, all other things will follow." (Dawson, 1915, p.174)

**Concept of Perfectionism;** Confucian "Perfectionism" is a perfectionist political doctrine that justifies how political or state institutions and policy makers are to formulate policies to facilitate and promote their subjects' interests. Many perfectionists presented their political thoughts over the subject of human development, and the role of states to procure the tasks more efficiently.

While, there is no term in the classical Confucian texts that is equivalent to the notion of a good life, it would not be too far off the mark to say that early Confucians subscribed to a broad conception that takes material well-being, moral self-cultivation and virtuous social relationships as constituents of 'the good life' for a normal human being, with the ideal of statehood as the highest good. (Steven Wall, 2014)

The concept of perfectionism is more acceptable in East-Asian societies where citizens are much committed to the perfectionist thoughts of Confucius.

The view, once it is appropriately updated for modern circumstances, remains relevant to pluralistic democracies, including non-Asian societies. He defends a moderate version of Confucian perfectionism that asks policymakers to justify Confucian values without appeal to the truth of Confucianism as a comprehensive doctrine about how to live. Moderate perfectionism of this sort, Chan claims, is a viable option even for modern pluralistic societies whose culture has not been shaped by Confucianism. (Chan, 2000 ).

Presenting his doctrine over "Proper Role of Government", teachings of Confucius enunciate the fundamental features and principles of a government and its proper role. As a political and social theorist, he endeavors to present a set of organized principles which can lead to a stable and more prosperous society and government. He tries to give a role model system over the matter of distribution of power among leading state institutions, and their interaction with the rest of society is also mentioned within particular paradigms of powers and responsibilities. Through the theory, Confucius sustains a harmony among state institutions then, among state and stake holders to work in the same dimension to procure climax in all fields of life.

Confucius died, it is recorded that his last words were regrets that none among the rulers (then living) possessed the sagacity requisite to a proper appreciation of his ethical philosophy and teachings. He died dishonored,- in his seventy-third year, 479 B.C., feeling in the flickering beats of his failing heart that his inspiring pleas for truth and justice, industry and self-denial, moderation and public duty, though then without having awakened men's impulses, would yet stir the depths of the social life of his land. (Dawson, 2010)

Confucius had keen interest in how one should govern oneself and how the state or government is to run a society. The governing methods can be traced back to forefathers and the traditional methods of ruling will deliver more fruitful results to the rest of the people. In return, the society would be harmonious, stable and virtuous. Government, to Confucius, is a tool in order to bring out the best fruits and results for citizens. Furthermore, Confucius sees “government” as the responsible for well being in all aspects of lives of its citizens forcing not to put away their “individual characters and roles”. Every person should perform one’s duties efficiently carrying out their roles. Government should respect their citizens. Citizens have a plenty of expectations from their government. So, government should never frustrate faith and hopes of its citizens. To treat citizens with love and concern is also responsibilities of government.

Devolution of Power; it is another important philosophy of Confucius whose roots and effects on his philosophical notions can be traced back to his era of living. The ongoing deteriorating political and social systems of that era put deep and bad smudges on the philosophical notions of Confucius as the era lapsed into political maneuvering, bribery, chaos and the conflicts based on material benefits. By keeping in mind the whole scenario with wider indispensable consequences, he drew a conclusion in the shape of his philosophy that mismanagement, misuse of authority and interference in others’ affairs were the major causes of the crippling and malicious situation. Over the question of the ruler of the large state of Qi, Lu about the principles of good governance, Confucius replied, "Good government consists of the ruler being a ruler, the minister being a minister, the father being a father, and the son being a son" (Lunyu, 12,11) (Malpas, 2012).

In the Confucian doctrine of “Role of Government”, three basic and utmost responsibilities or requisites of a government are defined; sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people.

Belief in the innate goodness and perfectibility of man has had strong implications for the development of the Chinese political system. The ruler's main function in the Confucian state was to educate and transform the people. This was ideally accomplished not by legal regulation and coercion, but by personal rule, moral example, and mediation in disputes by the emperor and his officials. Confucian political theory emphasized conflict resolution through mediation, rather

than through the application of abstract rules to establish right and wrong in order to achieve social harmony. (Molloy, 2008)

Talking about “Good Governance, Confucius devised three basic requisites on whose the task of good governance can be accomplished; sufficient food, sufficient military equipment, and the confidence of people in their ruler. These three are the fundamental and essential elements to achieve and then, sustain good governance. Giving answers of various questions of his student over governance, Confucius explicates his views in his Analects,

“Tsze-kung asked about government. The Master said, ‘The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler. (Confucius, Confucian Analects, The Great Learning & The Doctrine of the Mean, 1971)

He further writes,

“Tsze-kung again asked, ‘If it cannot be helped and one of the remaining two must be dispensed with, which of them should be forgone?’ The Master answered, ‘Part with the food. From of old death has been the lot of all men; but if the people have not confidence in their rulers, there is no stability for the state.’ (Dawson, 1993,p.183).

Throwing light over the concept of “**An ideal society**”, Confucius envisages the concept of an ideal society which returns to its traditional and cultural roots for the sake of prosperity and stability. Despite the adoption of the norms and values by the person who governs the society or government. All and sundry should change themselves following the pure spirit of their traditional roots. He insisted to adopt customs and traditions which a society gets from its ancestors.

The ideal world of Confucianism is a kind of ‘moral community’ the members of which control their desires in an appropriate way according to their innate moral emotions, so that their behavior follows public order autonomously to realize the common good. It is also a kind of ‘life community’ in which not only humans but every creature between heaven and earth is able to give full expression to its nature and can strive to reach the cosmic harmony. The principal mechanism to obtain this world relies upon the universal moral emotions of humanity: ‘human minds loving good and abhorring evil’ and ‘the mind that cannot bear to see life lost.’ Thus, the ruler should set a good example by restraining his own selfish desires, and should help people cultivate their innate moral emotions; people thus educated become capable of and responsible for building the morally ideal world. (Choi Young-jin, 2016)

Being a victim of a corrupt and politically spoiled society, Confucius observed all the negativities and social as well as administrative evils in the set-up and became a strong staunch of strict punishment of the corrupt officials. Indirectly, Confucius gave the taste of accountability in his socio-political thoughts as he says that every person is to be despoiled over one's administrative negligence and incompetency. Strict measures are to be taken by the relative government to punish them harshly.

Only when things are investigated is knowledge extended; only when knowledge is extended are thoughts sincere; only when thoughts are sincere are minds rectified; only when minds are rectified are the characters of persons cultivated; only when character is cultivated are our families regulated; only when families are regulated are states well governed; only when states are well governed is there peace in the world. (Berling, 1982)

Confucius, in his concept of "All Under Heaven", examined the demise of his society which was losing intrinsic societal and ethical as well as religious values. Thus, his intention was to restore and reunite the world under a sky. All human beings are fallow-beings, and they should live together with mutual and bilateral cooperation and harmony. That's why he devised the concept of "All under Heaven" and made an impassioned plea for its projection and development. The concept was only presented for the restoration of peace, brotherhood and religious as well as ethnic harmony which would be the motivational factors to disseminate peace and to proscribe wars. (Gauangyi, 2013)

His ethical doctrine is deeply intermingled with his concept of an "Ideal Society". His major work also focuses on ethics which is defined by him as "proper behavior". People should conduct their lives according to the two basic principles; first is *Ren* means having concern for others, and the second principle is *li* means appropriate behavior. Furthermore, "Ren" is Confucius' virtue that encompasses conduct in the favor of the whole society with altruistic thoughts. Ren is also defined as appropriate and protective behavior towards feelings of children. Confucius said that no one should see nothing improper, hear nothing improper, say nothing improper and do nothing improper. If we were to identify the virtue that Confucius and his followers regarded as most important, it would be that of **jen** (pronounced **ren**) or humanity. There is a level or kind of behavior that is to be practiced that is the essential nature of **jen**. Though it is at the very heart of his teaching, Confucius never defined **jen**. When one of his disciples asked him if a certain person or a certain kind of conduct exemplified **jen**, Confucius would usually reply that the person or the conduct in question fell somewhat short of being **jen**. On the one hand he tells us that **jen** is not far away from us, and on the other he suggests that very few people are able to keep it constantly in mind. Hence, everyone is constantly in process of being perfected with **jen** behavior the goal. Since this is the case, Confucius put great emphasis on education as the best means to lead people toward **jen**. (Molloy, 2008)

He threw light over “**Ren**” with the statement, “wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others (6:28). Confucius further opined that *Ren* is not far off; he who seeks it has already found it. And *Ren* is close to man and never leaves him.

Confucius follows the conception of “Li” and “Ren” according to their pure spirit. So, the conclusion and crux of Confucian social philosophy could be summarized into these words, if any society puts away these two basic standards of ethics or proper behavior- “Ren” and “Li”- it would lapse into chaos, political instability, moral demise, corruption, crippling situation of law and order, unscrupulous behavior of rulers, inflation, poverty and such kind of other social evils.

**Concept of State:** Miles Menander Dawson proclaims in his book *The Ethics of Confucius* that Confucius espouses the idea of state that has deep roots in his doctrine of government. Both concepts are indispensable with each other and one of these concepts can never be comprehended without the proper understanding of another concept. This is meant by to rightly govern the state; it is necessary first to regulate one's own family.

One cannot instruct others who cannot instruct his own children. Without going beyond the family, the prince may learn all the lessons of statecraft, filial piety by which the sovereign is also served, fraternal submission by which older men and superiors are also served, kindness by which also the common people should be ministered unto”(Dawson, 1915,p.172).

**Rectification of names:** According to Confucius, many troubles regarding social disorder stem from using inappropriate words by ignoring things' proper spirit and names. He endeavored to resolve the problem offering the concept of "Rectification of Names" in which he proposes that things are to perceive, then understand and then, name them according to their realities in which shape they exist before us. For more, the translated phrase of his Analects depicts the clear conception of "Rectification of Names.

A superior man, in regard to what he does not know, shows a cautious reserve. If names are correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accordance with the truth of things and affairs cannot be carried on to success. When affair are carried on to success, proprieties and music do not flourish. When proprieties and music do not flourish, punishments will not be properly awarded. When punishments are not properly awarded, the people do not know how to move hand or foot. Therefore, a superior man considers it necessary that the names he uses may be spoken appropriately and also that what he speaks may be carried out appropriately. What the superior man requires is just that in his words there may be nothing incorrect.

The teachings of Confucius in this regard are usually summarized into five basic relationships in life firstly ruler to Subject secondly, parent to Child, husband to Wife, elder brother to Younger brother and friend to Friend.

In the classification or demarcation of relationships, Confucius tries to disseminate rich humanistic values; gentle treatment, sincerity, kindness, righteousness, love, care, brotherhood and affection etc. He is of the point of view that by adopting these values in our daily lives, human beings can live peacefully and more stable and prosperous lives. Social problems of the world can be proved redemptive if each person behaves in these manners. Connecting government with the concept of “Rectification of Names”, he postulates that the task of an ideal and righteous government would only be accomplished in the aforementioned way. In Confucianism, the Rectification of Names means that “things in actual fact should be made to accord with the implications attached to them by names, the prerequisites for correct living and even efficient government being that all classes of society should accord to what they ought to be” (Legge, verses.4-7).

If the concept of rectification of names is ignored, then to attain reality will be hard to achieve as different words have different meanings and sense of actions. Thus, the belief over the "Rectification of Names" will lead to attain reality according to the existence of things in the world following their pure spirit of creation.

Through the Rectification of Names, Confucius proposes for a standard language in which not only ancient rulers formed and promulgated rules and laws, and people followed them without any kind of confusion. I would like to be one of the protagonists of the concept that appears to me as a concept from whom current political theorists, rulers, policy makers and parliamentarians can formulate clear policies and impose them with any confusion. Via this concept in the current socio-political contexts, condition of law and order can be more stable as there would be no confusion and every citizen will be able to live with accurate understanding of laws which they would be supposed and restricted to follow.

Respect is also shown when a person follows an order of his teacher or boss and instructions from any authority are followed by anyone because of the clarification of the names, indirectly rectification of names leads and impels to follow the orders from authority and the name of the authority is itself a rectification of names.

It seems that perfectionism and accountability are based on the status and names of persons, and they are punished according to the nature of the job's name then, state of crime or administrative negligence is considered another factor. Consequently, the doctrine of Rectification of names and then, Confucius' approach pertaining to accountability and perfectionism are intermingled with each other and both have impacts over each other. In the recent time, Confucius' approaches regarding perfectionism and rectification of names exist in all

democratic countries and still the concepts could not lose their worth and importance in socio-political paradigms.

Last but not least, these two factors- accountability and rectification of names- have become source of inspiration for developing and third world countries who are striking for a well defined, well-organized and well-established type of political system. Even in corrupt democratic countries, peoples are calling for free and fair elections and transparent check and balance over the whole administrative set-up.

Political doctrine of Confucius is deeply rooted in his ethical and religious thoughts. He devised a set of new characteristics of standardized system of government, according to which the best form of government must perform her duties following natural moral values. (Riegel, 2013).

According to Confucius' Analects as translated by James Legge (2009), the best form of government rules through rites, and people are supposed to behave according to the natural morality by ironing out bribery and coercion from their conducts. All subjects of society should realize that societal interests can be procured through collective collaboration and common efforts. He endeavored to flesh over the role and standards of government in his most important and remarkable Analects ( Legge, 2009)

If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of the shame, and moreover will become good (2:3).

Confucius utilizes pre-existing institutions, forms of government and religions to frame a new political and social agenda with immense and formidable objectives for the cause of humanity and the revival of unified Royal state. The rulers of the unified royal state would be nominated and selected on the basis of their moral values and merits rather than lineage. In that type of state, ruler's character, status and personality would be the central point pertaining to morality and law. Instead of imposing rules and laws, rulers of the state would also play the role of a charismatic model for their masses, to which they will follow willingly. Confucius backed up the idea of a virtuous ruler. Some aspects of his philosophy put barriers to decrease powers of ruler. Personality of a ruler must be comprised of self-determination, honesty, trust, truth, love and care. All aforementioned factors are to be presented even in the facial expressions of a ruler to fascinate the rest of the community to adopt the characteristics. Confucius believed, if a ruler were led rightly not only by words but also via his actions, the rest of the people would follow his actions whatever the orders or laws will be passed. (Richey, 2002).

Confucius was more reluctant about the ongoing situation in his society which had bogged down into political leg-pulling, chaos, bribery, bloody incidents, endless conflicts and

wars of feudal powers. In this intricate political and social scenario, Confucius was a person who urged them to unite themselves over a well-defined agenda to procure stability and peace. For that cause, he presented a model which was comprised of the earlier examples of earlier societies' climax and decay because of bloody conflicts, political leg-pulling, bribery and such kind of other social, political, religious and economic tribulations.

**Critical Evaluation of Confucius' Thoughts:** First, as a religious thinker and socio-political scientist, he had to adopt orthodoxy particularly in religious doctrines whose impacts can be traced easily in the concept of "ideal society" in which he emphasized to adopt old traditions which have been set up after long rational experiments, exercises and practices.

Second, Confucius' political theory of "Proper Role of Government" may not be acceptable exclusively for post scientific societies in which many societies had to formulate their new traditions and customs for progress according to the new and forthcoming norms and values which fluctuate and change from one era to another by deviating away from old customs and traditions of their forefathers.

Third, customs and traditions can never be stagnant as they remain all the time in the phase of evolution according to the social, political and economic changes. Thus, the concept of Confucius has become out-dated and not acceptable particularly for post scientific societies.

Fourth, the concept has ideological compatibility to cultural relativism as both encourage culture and traditions of a society by calling the norms and values ethical or beneficial within a society, which may be unethical or harmful for others. For instance, to burn widows is still common in various sub-castes of India as they perceive it their cultural and religious identity (Weinberger-Thomas, 2000). But the rest of the world, even their own government declares it as an immoral and inhuman act (Satti Prevention Act,1987).

As it stems from the Confucius' notions, Indian tradition "to burn widows" could be helpful to attain and sustain progress. But on the other hand, other societies observe aforementioned custom as illegal and unethical. To eradicate this inhumane cultural practice, governments and organizations are making strides by following general principles of morality and humanity designed by human agencies or given by divine scriptures. Thus, the doctrine of an "Ideal society" is violation of human rights to much extent.

Fifth, there are -living in a global village- certain basic internationally recognized standards on which all societies under the slogan of *world* that is an endeavor to formulate their rules and regulations according to the internationally established standards of morality, humanity, freedom, virtue and equality. While, Confucius' philosophical notions contradict with the international uniformity of ideas, values and customs which are formed for the cause of humanity and positivity, and all governments, societies and organizations take steps to ensure the

promulgation of the standards which contradict with many cultures at many times. For instance, honor killing is a cultural phenomenon of the sub-continent and is deeply rooted in the daily matters' of the peoples and they react harshly if anyone speaks up against the culture (Lari, 2011).

Thus, by following Confucius approach for an ideal society, honor killing is to be continued as it resolves disputes and much more. However, on the other hand, the world perceives it as an immoral and a giant barrier in human as well as social development. Because of that, international, local organizations and leading powers of the world have been urging the victim societies to take precautionary measures to abolish the harsh cultural myth of honor killing. Thus, Confucius' social concept of an ideal society contradicts in itself because of his religious orthodoxy if we examine it with the lens of post scientific developments and changes.

Comprehending the Confucian perfectionism in the perspective of modern and post scientific era, the analysis can be drawn easily that Confucius perfectionism is too near to western democracies as well as democratic political thoughts of western philosophers. And the roots of Confucian perfectionism's impact can be traced easily over western political theorists.

It seems that the separation of powers, freedom of speech, liberty, protection of fundamental rights, self-respect, human rights, human and social development, Free, fair and competitive elections, equal distribution of resources and civic education are the most distinguished features of the modern and developed democracies. Thus, these democratic values stemmed from Confucian Perfectionism theory. Western democratic societies, philosophers and rulers much influenced consciously or unconsciously by the most important religio-political figure, Confucius.

Conceiving the doctrine in international perspective, major revolutions on the map of the world took place because of insufficient transparency, administrative corruption, and governmental priorities to secure their political and economic interests compromising over public as well as national interests. Russian, French and Iranian revolutions are the most credible events which show that the doctrine still remains live in different spans of time.

It is my understanding that the doctrine of Perfectionism will remain alive and will affect many nations to bring positive changes towards social and human development which are being deprived and suppressed of their due rights and also sweltering in the heat of monarch, so-called democracy and dictatorial rule. The notions of Confucian Perfectionism are deeply rooted in the humanistic natural desires and values. So, dramatic political and revolutionary changes will shook tectonic plates of socio-political scenario of various countries.

## **Conclusion**

We must see behind the surface in order to detect and address the challenges which impede human development. Confucius examined all factors which were conceiving as barriers in human development and progress. Then, he gave solutions of those challenges in the shape of his teachings which played a vital and an active role in redemption of those challenges, and made the people prosperous. It does not matter under whose influence he constructed his philosophy whether is Plato or Aristotle, or anyone else. His thoughts of morality and politics proved fruitful for humanity. The school of thought must be studied in various aspects to obtain more and more benefits from the intellect.

Knowledge is the basis of evolution and development. It is not a stagnant process. So, Confucius concepts of *Ratification of Names, All under Heaven* and *State's concept* are to be studied with special reference to Platonic philosophy and Nechomichian ethics<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The *Nicomachean Ethics* is the name normally given to Aristotle's best-known work on ethics.

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