

The influence of ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts on the development of ancient Chinese politics and economy

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Abstract

As the profound core of traditional culture, ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts have deeply permeated all aspects of the development of politics and economy. Philosophical schools such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, with their unique concepts and value systems, have comprehensively shaped the political landscape and economic form of ancient China. Through an in-depth analysis of the thoughts of Confucianism, such as "benevolence and love" and "propriety and righteousness", Taoism, such as "governing by doing nothing" and "the unity of man and nature", and Legalism, such as "governing the country by law", this paper systematically expounds their specific influences on the construction of political ethics, the formation of social systems, and the shaping of economic concepts. Combined with modern economic theories, it explores their enlightenment and value in contemporary society, aiming to reveal the close connection between ancient philosophical thoughts and the development of politics and economy, and to provide useful references for understanding the context of Chinese historical development and the construction of contemporary society.

Keywords: Ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts; Confucianism; Taoism; Legalism; Political and economic development

1. Introduction

Ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts have a long history. After thousands of years of inheritance and development, they have formed a rich and diverse ideological system. These philosophical thoughts are not only the crystallization of the wisdom of the ancients but also the key factors influencing the development of ancient Chinese society. From the construction of political systems to the selection of economic models, from the maintenance of social order to the inheritance of cultural values, ancient philosophical thoughts have played an irreplaceable role. Confucianism emphasizes moral education and social responsibility, Taoism advocates conforming to nature and governing by doing nothing, and Legalism advocates governing the country by law and strict control. They are intertwined and influence each other, jointly shaping the unique political and economic landscape of ancient China. A thorough study of the influence of ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts on the development of politics and economy will help us better understand the internal logic of Chinese historical development, excavate the contemporary value of traditional culture, and provide historical experience and theoretical support for the development of modern society.

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2. The Influence of Confucian Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Politics and Economy

2.1. Overview of Confucian Thoughts

Confucianism was founded by Confucius and gradually developed and improved by thinkers such as Mencius and Xunzi, and it gradually became the mainstream ideology in ancient Chinese society. Its core values include "benevolence", "righteousness", "propriety", "wisdom", and "trustworthiness", emphasizing that the relationship between people should be based on morality and ethics. "Benevolence" is the core of Confucianism, which is reflected in the care and respect for others; "righteousness" is the criterion of behavior, requiring people to follow justice and moral norms when acting; "propriety" is the external manifestation of social order, and it regulates people's behavior through etiquette systems. Confucianism attaches great importance to personal moral cultivation, believing that personal moral perfection is the foundation for achieving social harmony, and advocating the path of "cultivating one's moral character, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to all under heaven" to achieve the unity of personal value and social value.

2.2. The Influence of Confucian Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Politics

2.2.1. The Construction of Political Ethics

Confucianism takes "benevolent government" as the core and constructs a unique political ethics system. Confucius advocated "governing by virtue", believing that rulers should, based on morality, implement benevolent government and care for the people. Mencius further developed this thought and put forward the view that "the people are the most important, the state comes second, and the monarch is the least important", emphasizing the important position of the people in national politics. This political ethics concept requires rulers to lead by example and become moral models, governing the country through moral influence rather than relying solely on coercive means. Under the influence of Confucianism, rulers in ancient China generally attached great importance to their own moral images and paid attention to the moral education of the people. For example, throughout the dynasties, educational institutions such as the Imperial College and the Guozhi Jian were established, using Confucian classics as teaching materials to cultivate the moral qualities of officials and scholars. At the same time, rulers also spread Confucian moral concepts to the people and advocated a good social atmosphere by issuing imperial edicts and implementing etiquette systems. This political ethics system with morality as the core helps to maintain social order and stability and enhance the people's sense of identity and belonging to the country.

2.2.2. The Influence on the Bureaucracy System

Confucian thoughts have had a profound impact on the formation and development of the ancient Chinese bureaucracy system. In terms of selecting officials, Confucianism emphasizes both moral integrity and talent, with morality taking precedence. The system of recommending talents in the Han Dynasty took "filial piety and integrity" as the main selection criteria, focusing on examining the moral qualities and social reputations of candidates. Although the Nine-Rank System in the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties had the drawback of "no poor families in the upper ranks and no powerful families in the lower ranks" in its later period, in the early stage, it also took morality and talent as important bases for evaluating talents. In the Sui and Tang dynasties, the establishment of the imperial examination system provided a systematic guarantee for the implementation of Confucianism in the selection of officials. The imperial examination mainly focused on Confucian classics, and through the examination, scholars with high moral qualities and cultural levels were selected to enter the officialdom. After entering the officialdom, these scholars adhered to Confucian political concepts, regarding "cultivating one's moral character, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to all under heaven" as their own responsibilities, and devoting themselves to serving the country and the people. Confucianism also emphasizes the loyalty and integrity of officials, requiring them to be loyal to the monarch, be honest and dedicated to public service, and oppose corruption and forming cliques for personal gain. This thought has played a positive regulatory role in the construction and management of the ancient Chinese officialdom, helping to improve the overall quality and administrative efficiency of the officialdom.

2.3. The Influence of Confucian Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Economy

2.3.1. The Formation of Economic Concepts

Confucianism takes agriculture as the foundation of the national economy and emphasizes "valuing agriculture and suppressing commerce". Confucius put forward that "food is the paramount necessity of the people", deeply recognizing the fundamental role of agriculture in the national economy and social stability. Mencius also advocated that "if the farming seasons are not violated, the grain will be more than enough to eat; if the fine nets do not enter the deep ponds,

the fish and turtles will be more than enough to eat; if the axes and hatchets enter the mountains at the right time, the timber will be more than enough to use", emphasizing the importance of rationally using natural resources and developing agricultural production. Under the influence of Confucianism, dynasties in ancient China regarded agriculture as the foundation of the country and adopted a series of policies and measures to encourage agricultural development. For example, reducing farmers' taxes and corvée, providing technical support for agricultural production, and building water conservancy projects. The implementation of these policies promoted the prosperous development of the agricultural economy, making ancient Chinese agriculture at the leading level in the world for a long time.

2.3.2. The Regulation of Commercial Activities

Although Confucianism advocates "valuing agriculture and suppressing commerce", it does not completely deny the existence of commercial activities. Confucianism emphasizes "both righteousness and profit", believing that commercial activities should follow moral norms and oppose the behavior of being solely profit-oriented. Confucius put forward that "the gentleman understands righteousness, while the petty man understands profit", advocating that people should conform to morality when pursuing profits. Mencius also believed that "when the upper and lower classes compete for profit, the country will be in danger", emphasizing the importance of morality and righteousness in economic activities. Under the influence of this thought, some moral norms and business ethics gradually formed in ancient Chinese commercial activities. For example, merchants paid attention to honesty and trustworthiness, fair trade, and opposed fraud and monopolistic behavior. At the same time, commercial activities were also strictly regulated by the government to ensure the stability of the market order. In addition, Confucianism also emphasizes that commercial activities should serve the overall interests of the country and society, and merchants should assume certain social responsibilities. For example, during times of famine, merchants should actively participate in disaster relief activities and make contributions to society. This regulation and guidance of commercial activities help to maintain the stability of the commercial order and promote the healthy development of commercial activities.

3. The Influence of Taoist Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Politics and Economy

3.1. Overview of Taoist Thoughts

Taoist thoughts are represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, and their core ideas include "Tao", "governing by doing nothing", and "the unity of man and nature". Taoism believes that "Tao" is the root and essence of all things in the universe, an existence beyond human cognition and language expression. Humans should conform to the laws of "Tao" and not overly interfere with the development of nature and society. "Governing by doing nothing" does not mean doing nothing but means not overly interfering and letting things develop naturally. Taoism emphasizes the freedom of the individual and the transcendence of the spirit, pursues harmony and unity with nature, and opposes artificial constraints and utilitarian pursuits.

3.2. The Influence of Taoist Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Politics

3.2.1. The Political Concept of "Governing by Doing Nothing"

Taoist thought of "governing by doing nothing" has had an important impact on ancient Chinese politics. In some historical periods, rulers took "governing by doing nothing" as the political guiding ideology, adopted policies of light corvée and low taxes and letting the people recuperate, reduced interference in the social economy, and let society develop freely in a natural state. For example, in the early Western Han Dynasty, facing the economic depression after long-term wars, rulers adopted the "Huang-Lao School of Thought" of Taoism and implemented the policy of "governing by doing nothing". During this period, the government reduced the tax and corvée burdens on farmers and relaxed the restrictions on commercial activities, enabling the social economy to recover and develop rapidly, and the prosperous situation of the "Rule of Wen and Jing" emerged. The Taoist thought of "governing by doing nothing" reminds rulers to respect the natural laws of social development and avoid the intensification of social contradictions caused by excessive interference. It emphasizes that the government should play the role of a "night watchman", providing a stable environment for social development rather than participating too much in specific economic and social affairs. This political concept, to a certain extent, helps to reduce the burden on the people and stimulate the vitality and creativity of society.

3.2.2. The Concept of Checks and Balances on Political Power

Taoist thoughts contain the concept of checks and balances on political power. Laozi believed that "talking too much will lead to exhaustion, it is better to maintain the mean", advocating that rulers should not centralize power excessively and should maintain a relatively balanced state. Zhuangzi also criticized the abuse of power and autocratic rule and emphasized the freedom and dignity of the individual. This thought has had a certain impact on ancient Chinese politics, prompting rulers to be scrupulous when exercising power and not daring to act recklessly. In history, some insightful people often quoted Taoist thoughts to admonish rulers, asking them to restrain their desire for power and pay attention to the livelihood of the people. For example, during the Tang Dynasty, Wei Zheng and other ministers once quoted Taoist thoughts to admonish Emperor Taizong of Tang, reminding him to put the people first and not to overwork the people and waste money. Although the Taoist concept of checks and balances on political power did not form a systematic political system, it has had a positive impact on the political practice of ancient China to a certain extent, helping to maintain relative political stability and social fairness and justice.

3.3. The Influence of Taoist Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Economy

3.3.1. The Naturalistic Tendency of Economic Development

Taoist thought of "the unity of man and nature" emphasizes the harmony and unity between humans and nature, and this thought is reflected in the economic field as a naturalistic tendency in economic development. Taoism believes that economic activities should conform to the laws of nature and not over-exploit and damage natural resources. In ancient society, this thought was reflected in people's attitude towards agricultural production. Farmers paid attention to farming according to natural solar terms and soil conditions, and adopted methods such as crop rotation and fallowing to protect soil fertility and achieve the sustainable development of agriculture. At the same time, Taoist thoughts also oppose excessive commercial activities and the pursuit of material wealth, believing that this will lead to the corruption of social customs and the exhaustion of natural resources. Under the influence of this thought, some thinkers and politicians in ancient China advocated restricting the scale and development speed of commercial activities to maintain social stability and the balance of the natural environment. Although this view has restricted the development of the commercial economy to a certain extent, it also reflects Taoism's concern for the natural environment and social sustainable development.

3.3.2. The Enlightenment to Economic Management

Taoist thought of "governing by doing nothing" also provides certain enlightenment to ancient Chinese economic management. It reminds managers to respect the natural laws of the market and not overly interfere with economic activities. In a market economy, market mechanisms such as the price mechanism, the supply and demand mechanism, and the competition mechanism can automatically regulate economic operations and achieve the rational allocation of resources. The government should reduce direct interference in the market and let the market mechanism play a leading role. At the same time, Taoist thoughts also emphasize that managers should pay attention to the overall balance and long-term development of economic activities and not just pursue short-term interests. For example, when formulating economic policies, the impacts on the environment, society, and culture should be considered to achieve the coordinated development of the economy, society, and the environment. This enlightenment to economic management still has important reference significance in modern economic management.

4. The Influence of Legalist Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Politics and Economy

4.1. Overview of Legalist Thoughts

Legalist thoughts are represented by Han Feizi, Shang Yang, etc., emphasizing governing the country by law and advocating maintaining social order and national rule by establishing strict legal systems. Legalists believe that human nature is inherently evil and that people's behavior needs to be restricted by the coercive means of the law. Legalists pay attention to practical effects, emphasize the authority and enforcement of the law, and advocate using the means of clear rewards and punishments to motivate and deter the people. Legalist thoughts also emphasize the absolute authority of the monarch, advocating that the monarch centralize power and implement autocratic rule.

4.2. The Influence of Legalist Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Politics

4.2.1. The Establishment and Improvement of the Legal System

Legalist thoughts have played a crucial role in the establishment and improvement of the ancient Chinese legal system. When Shang Yang carried out reforms in the State of Qin, he formulated a series of strict legal systems, including the

household registration system, the military merit title system, the land system, etc., comprehensively regulating and managing the politics, economy, and social life of the State of Qin. The implementation of these legal systems greatly improved the national governance ability and administrative efficiency of the State of Qin and laid a solid foundation for the rise of the State of Qin and the unification of the six states. Since then, dynasties in ancient China, under the influence of Legalist thoughts, have continuously improved the legal system and strengthened the enforcement of the law. For example, the Qin Dynasty formulated the "Qin Law", the Han Dynasty formulated the "Nine Chapters of Law" on the basis of the "Qin Law", and the "Tang Code with Commentaries" of the Tang Dynasty is a masterpiece of the ancient Chinese legal system, having a profound impact on the legal systems of later generations. Legalist thoughts emphasize the universality and fairness of the law, advocating that everyone is equal before the law, and regardless of their status, wealth or poverty, they should abide by the law. Although this idea is difficult to fully implement in practice, it has, to a certain extent, broken the privileged status of the aristocracy and promoted social fairness and justice.

4.2.2. The Strengthening of the Centralized Power System

Legalist thoughts advocate the centralization of power by the monarch and achieve national unity and stability by strengthening the power of the monarch. Under the influence of Legalist thoughts, the centralized power system in ancient China has been continuously strengthened. After Qin Shi Huang unified the six states, he implemented the system of prefectures and counties, abolished the enfeoffment system, centralized the political, economic, and military power of the whole country in the central government, and established a highly centralized feudal autocratic rule. Since then, dynasties have been constantly strengthening centralization and weakening local forces. For example, during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, the "Decree of Pushing Grace" was implemented to weaken the power of the feudal states; the Tang Dynasty implemented the Three Departments and Six Ministries system to further strengthen the power of the central government. The strengthening of the centralized power system helps to improve the decision-making efficiency and execution ability of the country and strengthen the unified management of the whole country. However, at the same time, it is also prone to the abuse of power and the breeding of corruption, which has a certain negative impact on social development.

4.3. The Influence of Legalist Thoughts on Ancient Chinese Economy

4.3.1. The Implementation of the Policy of Emphasizing Agriculture and Suppressing Commerce

Legalist thoughts emphasize the importance of agriculture and advocate implementing the policy of emphasizing agriculture and suppressing commerce through legal means. When Shang Yang carried out reforms in the State of Qin, he stipulated a series of policies to reward farming and sericulture, encouraging farmers to engage in agricultural production. At the same time, he strictly restricted commercial activities, such as imposing high business taxes and limiting the social status of merchants. The implementation of this policy promoted the development of the agricultural economy in the State of Qin and enhanced its economic strength. Thereafter, successive dynasties implemented the policy of emphasizing agriculture and suppressing commerce to varying degrees, regarding agriculture as the foundation of the national economy and restricting the development of commerce and handicrafts. The policy of emphasizing agriculture and suppressing commerce ensured national food security and fiscal revenue within a certain period, and promoted the progress of agricultural technology and the development of agricultural production. However, in the long run, this policy inhibited the development of the commodity economy, hindered the emergence and development of capitalist sprouts, and had an adverse impact on the transformation of ancient Chinese society.

4.3.2. The Comprehensive Control of the Economy by the State

Legalist thoughts advocate that the state should comprehensively control the economy to achieve national prosperity and stability. Under the influence of Legalist thoughts, rulers in ancient China adopted a series of measures to strengthen the intervention and management of the economy. For example, the salt and iron monopoly system was implemented, taking the production and sales rights of salt and iron under state ownership to increase national fiscal revenue. The Junshu and Pingzhun policies were carried out to stabilize prices through government macro-control and prevent merchants from hoarding goods for speculation. In addition, the government directly managed important handicraft and commercial sectors. For instance, official handicraft workshops were established to monopolize the production and operation of certain industries. The comprehensive control of the economy by the state can, to a certain extent, concentrate resources and promote the construction of large-scale projects and the development of the national economy. However, at the same time, it also restricts free market competition, suppresses the vitality of the private economy, and leads to a lack of innovation impetus in economic development.

5. The Enlightenment of Ancient Chinese Philosophical Thoughts to Contemporary Society

5.1. The Enlightenment to Contemporary Political Construction

The Confucian thought of "benevolent government", the Taoist thought of "governing by doing nothing", and the Legalist thought of "governing the country by law" in ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts have important enlightenment significance for contemporary political construction. The Confucian thought of "benevolent government" emphasizes putting the people at the center and paying attention to people's livelihood and well-being, which highly coincides with the people-centered development thought adhered to by contemporary China. In contemporary political construction, the government should always prioritize the interests of the people, actively solve the hot and difficult issues that the people care about, and continuously enhance the people's sense of gain, happiness, and security. The Taoist thought of "governing by doing nothing" reminds the government to properly handle the relationships between the government and the market, and between the government and society, reduce excessive interference in microeconomic activities and social affairs, and give full play to the decisive role of the market in resource allocation and the self-regulatory ability of society. Meanwhile, the government should strengthen its macro-control and public service functions to create a favorable environment for economic and social development. The Legalist thought of "governing the country by law" emphasizes the authority and fairness of the law, which has important reference value for building a country ruled by law in contemporary China. Against the backdrop of comprehensively promoting the rule of law, efforts should be made to strengthen the construction of the legal system, improve the system of laws and regulations, enforce laws strictly, administer justice impartially, ensure that everyone is equal before the law, and maintain social fairness, justice, and stable order.

5.2. The Enlightenment to Contemporary Economic Development

The economic concepts in ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts, such as Confucianism's "emphasizing agriculture and suppressing commerce" and "valuing both righteousness and profit", Taoism's naturalistic tendency in economic development, and Legalism's comprehensive control of the economy by the state, also have certain enlightenment effects on contemporary economic development. In contemporary economic development, the fundamental position of agriculture should be maintained, the support and protection for agriculture should be increased, the modernization of agriculture should be promoted, and national food security should be ensured. At the same time, the relationship between righteousness and profit should be properly handled. Under the conditions of a market economy, enterprises and individuals should not only pursue economic benefits but also pay attention to social benefits, abide by moral norms and laws and regulations, and achieve the organic unity of economic and social interests. Taoism's naturalistic tendency in economic development reminds us to establish the concept of green development, focus on the coordinated unity of economic development and environmental protection, and achieve sustainable development. In the process of economic development, natural resources should be rationally utilized, environmental damage should be reduced, and the transformation of the economic development mode should be promoted. Although the Legalist thought of the state's comprehensive control of the economy needs to be critically inherited in contemporary times, the concept of government macro-control contained therein still holds great significance. Under the conditions of a market economy, the government should strengthen macro-control of the economy, use means such as fiscal policies and monetary policies to regulate economic operations, prevent economic risks, and promote the stable and healthy development of the economy.

6. Conclusion

The Confucian, Taoist, and Legalist thoughts in ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts have had a profound impact on the development of ancient Chinese politics and economy from different perspectives. Confucianism, with its concept of "benevolent government" and moral education system, has shaped the unique political ethics and bureaucratic system in ancient China, promoted the development of the agricultural economy, and regulated the moral norms of commercial activities. Taoist thoughts of "governing by doing nothing" and "the unity of man and nature" have provided a relaxed environment for social and economic development and guided people to focus on harmonious coexistence with nature. Legalist thoughts, with their strict legal system and concept of centralization of power, have strengthened the ruling order of the state.

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