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Moral politics and order construction: A cross-cultural comparative study of Plato and Confucius' political thought

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Abstract

During the axial age of world history, Confucius and Plato respectively represented the pioneering figures of Chinese and Western history, and their political thoughts both had significant influences on later generations. Both Confucius and Plato lived in an era of chaotic order. How to establish a good political system, restore good social order and build an ideal society became a topic of common concern for them. Confucius advocated "benevolence" and "propriety", and advocated the restoration of the rites of the Zhou Dynasty, while Plato emphasized the hierarchical order and the rule of the philosophical king. Both of their ideas emphasize "rule by virtue", that is, governing the country through the good moral character of the people to achieve the goal of an ideal society. Confucius and Plato reached a cross-civilization consensus on the level of moral politics: both regarded the moral qualities of rulers as the core elements of an ideal political system. Confucius, through the ethical construction of "the unity of sage and King", took the moral self-awareness of "cultivating oneself and pacifying others" as the prerequisite for the implementation of benevolent governance. Plato, through the concept of the "Philosopher-king", advocated that rulers must undergo dialectical training to achieve a cognitive understanding of the ultimate good. This shared aspiration for realizing an ideal society reflects the common goal of the two in their pursuit of a harmonious society. Therefore, comparing the political thoughts of Confucius and Plato can not only deepen our understanding of Chinese and Western political philosophy, but also provide an effective way for us to build a harmonious society, which has important theoretical and practical significance. This article will conduct an in-depth study from aspects such as the historical background and ideological connotations of the two ideas, in order to explore their commonalities and respective uniqueness

Keywords: Moral Politics; Order Construction; Plato Confucius; Political thought

1. Why do we need moral politics

1.1. The historical background of the emergence of Plato's idea of moral governance

Plato grew up during the period of political upheaval in Athens, experiencing the political changes from the golden age of Pericles to the rise of Macedonia, and deeply observing the inherent contradictions in his democratic practice. Athenian democracy is essentially a privileged politics of a minority of citizens (adult male free citizens), excluding slaves, foreigners, and women who make up the majority of the population. Interestingly, the oligarchic system partially recognizes the social identity of non citizen free citizens. This special political ecology gave birth to Plato's criticism of democracy: he regarded the majority rule in the Civic Square as a mass politics. In "The Republic", the necessity of professional rule is revealed through the "ship metaphor", providing a practical footnote to its philosopher king theory.[1]

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1.1.1. The Peloponnesian War - Athens fell into chaos

In Plato's era, the prosperity of Athenian civilization gradually faded away and entered its twilight years. During his teenage years, he was in the midst of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, which lasted for more than 20 years and ended in Athens' defeat. The entire region of Greece took a sharp turn for the worse, with the glory of democracy no longer shining and the prosperity of the past severely damaged. Socrates personally experienced this decline, and at the time of Plato's birth, war had already begun. After the war, Athens suffered from economic decline, political disorder, and cultural desolation, and all parties were deeply mired in chaos. (1) Economically, with the collapse and disintegration of small-scale farming, a large number of labor forces in the city states were lost. At that time, slave owners, speculators, and usurers took advantage of every opportunity, causing many free citizens to lose everything and fall into dire straits. A large number of impoverished citizens are living in miserable conditions, struggling to survive due to difficulties in food and clothing. (2) Politically, Plato's two uncles, Critias and Chamides, overthrew the democracy of Athens and established a puppet government of oligarchy known as the Thirty Tyrants.[2] Due to the intense social unrest, various foreign values have prevailed. The worship of traditional deities is no longer the only respect for the people in this place. The society is filled with the corruption of the atmosphere. People advocate extreme equality and freedom. The ignorant and the learned are treated equally, and the lazy and the diligent receive the same rewards. "The slave bought has the same freedom as the master who paid for them." "Everything is filled with the spirit of freedom..." "Freedom has reached its peak."[3] In this multi-dimensional society, the collective spirit has vanished completely.

1.1.2. The death of Socrates - Deepened the hatred for democracy

The severe decline of the democratic system, the collapse of traditional values, and the extremely radical and irrational Athenian democracy ultimately led to the death of Socrates. Plato was born in an era when city states were deeply mired in chaos, and personally witnessed the decline of city states and the decline of morality. The unjust use various means to seize power and wealth, thereby subjecting the masses to slavery, causing the political order to crumble, and democracy to lose its former vitality. At the age of 28, Plato's resentment towards democracy grew day by day due to this series of chaos, and he completely despaired of the current administrative system in Athens. He resolutely left his homeland and embarked on a journey to find a place that could carry his ideal political system.

1.1.3. The Birth of The Republic

Plato was deeply influenced by Socrates, especially after his death, and he had an extreme disgust towards the Athenian people at that time. In response to the decline of Athens, wars between city states, and the reality of a turbulent society, Plato's *The Republic* was published at this time. Plato attempted to reconstruct social order and establish a harmonious society based on the concepts of fairness, justice, goodness, and hierarchical order.[4] As the founder of political philosophy, Plato left an unforgettable mark on the development of Western political thought, and his influence lasted for thousands of years. Plato strongly criticized democratic city states and democratic individuals in the Republic.

1.2. The Historical Background of Confucius' Moral Governance Thought

1.2.1. Development of productivity

Chinese civilization originated from the Loess Plateau and is a typical agricultural civilization. Agricultural civilization attaches great importance to agricultural production, which relies on the utilization of water resources. The use of agricultural production tools and the improvement of water conservancy engineering technology are conducive to the development of productivity. During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, bronze and iron farming tools were widely used. Cattle plowing and horse plowing gradually became popular in agriculture, and agricultural techniques such as deep plowing and fertilization were recognized by people. Significant progress has also been made in hydraulic engineering and artificial irrigation technology.[5] With the innovation of social production technology and the significant improvement of production efficiency, human labor has begun to break through the primitive stage of simply maintaining basic survival needs. The continuous accumulation of surplus labor products not only lays the material foundation for the reform of social organizational forms, but also deeply touches the fundamental transformation of traditional production relations. In the historical process of sustained development of productive forces, the old slave production relations gradually revealed institutional difficulties that were disconnected from the development of the times: the traditional production mode gradually lagged behind the pace of productive forces development, and the contradiction between laborers and means of production became increasingly acute. Some slave owners and nobles not only used slaves to cultivate private land, but also occupied public land. They changed their exploitation methods by requiring laborers to hand over most of their products and retain a portion. As a result, the original slaves became dependent on the farmers, leading to the emergence of private land ownership and feudal dependence.[6] Confucius' ideas were related to the feudal agricultural economy and the patriarchal system based on blood ties, which adapted to the needs of absolute monarchy and reflected the social changes of the time. The

development of productivity has led to the emergence of private land ownership, the disintegration of the well field system, and the difficulty of continuing the feudal system, resulting in changes in the relationship between slaves and slave owners.[7]

1.2.2. The decline of the Zhou emperor and feudal lords

The wars and disasters in the late Western Zhou Dynasty greatly reduced the power of King Ping of Zhou. Eventually, King Ping migrated eastward, causing the Zhou dynasty to gradually decline, and the feudal lords were no longer subject to the orders of the Zhou emperor. Due to the differences in economic conditions among different countries, a situation of great power competition emerged during this period. The Zhou royal family continued to weaken, with each feudal lord controlling their own political power, and acts of usurpation continued to occur.[8] In the vassal states, the lifestyle of the royal family was corrupt, manifested in extortion and abuse of public power, which brutally oppressed and exploited the ruled, including commoners and lower class citizens. On the other hand, there are prominent internal contradictions between the ruling class such as the monarch and high-ranking officials, as well as between high-ranking officials and accompanying officials. And among the various vassal states, there are frequent unjust wars in which big countries bully small countries. According to the Spring and Autumn Annals, during the 242 years of the Spring and Autumn period, there were 483 wars launched by various states, and 450 alliances and meetings were held (of which "military and chariot meetings" accounted for half of the total). By the Spring and Autumn period, wars were no longer fought between different ethnic groups, but instead turned to the vassal states that were also enfeoffed during the Zhou Dynasty.[9] The characteristic of the Spring and Autumn period was that the power of the Zhou emperor became increasingly weak; The original feudal system and political order began to crumble, with the destruction of officials and officials, weak internal offices of feudal lords, and the monopoly of power by officials; The enfeoffment system closely linked to the feudal system also began to waver, replaced by a political pattern of power struggles between feudal states during the Spring and Autumn period.

1.2.3. Falling of Ceremony

In the early Western Zhou Dynasty, rulers innovatively constructed a political paradigm of feudalism based on a deep reconstruction of the political heritage of previous dynasties. This institutional system is based on the reality of collective labor in the agricultural economy, and through the precise coupling of kinship networks and geopolitical structures, it has formed a multi-level political integration mechanism. Through critical examination of the changes in the Xia and Shang dynasties, early Zhou politicians deeply realized that relying solely on violent deterrence could not achieve long-term stability, and that institutionalized governance ethics must be established. The "ritual and music civilization" system formed from this is essentially the internalization of hierarchical order into the value cognition of social members through symbolic behavioral norms and ritual practices. The core concept of the ritual and music system is to ensure that rulers at all levels and the lowest level of enslaved people adhere to their duties and responsibilities, without crossing boundaries.[10] In the late Western Zhou Dynasty, due to the disintegration of the feudal system and the continuous expansion of the scale of wars, the authority of the Zhou emperor gradually weakened. Some powerful feudal lords began to ignore the Zhou emperor, and the situation of "ritual and music conquests from the emperor" was broken by "ritual and music conquests from the feudal lords", leading to social chaos, disorder, and a state of anarchy. Therefore, the Spring and Autumn Period was an unprecedented period of great change, turmoil, and vitality in Chinese history. In history, this kind of transformation is known as the 'collapse of rites and music'. Confucius' political ideology was proposed during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period of ancient Chinese society.

2. The theoretical basis of moral politics

2.1. The theoretical foundation of Plato's idea of moral governance

2.1.1. "Goodness" and "Justice"

In his work "*The Republic*", Plato expressed a governance ideology of rule by virtue. He believed that the best political system is a country governed by virtue, which is also a good country and a just country. Among them, education is the most important way to achieve moral governance, while the rule of law exists as an auxiliary. Together, they constitute the ideal political system.

Plato's virtue politics is based on the theory of ideas. He believes that specific affairs in the sensory world, such as "just acts," are imitations of the world of ideas. Only by grasping ideas rationally can true knowledge be obtained. In this framework, virtue is the recognition and practice of ideas. All things in the world have their own ideals, and the concept of "goodness" is in a notifying position. "Goodness" is also the highest goal pursued by all things, which can make all things in a beautiful state.[11] Rulers need to master the concept of 'goodness', which is the ultimate source of all ideas

and gives meaning to other virtues. As a virtue, 'goodness' was originally only in the moral sense, but in Plato's theory of ideas, it is defined as the most true and beautiful, which makes it far beyond the original meaning of morality and become a supreme being. [12] Plato's discourse on "justice" is one of the core of his philosophical system, especially in the form of Socrates' dialogue in The Republic. His view of justice not only involves personal morality, but is also closely related to the construction of the city-state, emphasizing the dialectical unity of internal harmony and external order. In Plato's Republic, he divided "justice" into "city-state justice" and "individual justice".

2.1.2. Social division of labour

Plato, based on the theory of justice, advocates for order to be achieved through the rational division of labor between the three classes of the soul (reason, passion, and desire) and the city-state (philosophers, guardians, and producers). The essence of justice is' each performing their own duties', that is, each individual fulfills their social functions based on their innate abilities. The philosopher king gained legitimacy by mastering the concept of 'goodness', with the goal of establishing rational harmony within the city-state and overall stability in the Greek world. Plato molded the philosopher king as a practitioner of the concept of the ultimate good: his legitimacy in governance stems from a moral realm that transcends personal desires, with the overall well-being of the city-state as the sole value measure. Through the institutional design of public ownership of property, rulers are stripped of their material possessiveness, ensuring the purity of power operation. This "proletarian rule" model aims to dissolve the erosion of private interests on public affairs, and transform the virtues of wisdom, justice, and moderation into city-state order through the rational insight of the philosopher king. The philosopher king is not only a cognitive of the concept of goodness, but also a concrete carrier of the principle of justice. His rule is essentially a process of integrating knowledge and action to transform metaphysical truths into political practice, in order to achieve the isomorphic justice of soul order and city-state structure.

2.2. Theoretical basis of Confucius' rule of virtue: "Ren" and "Li"

Due to the collapse of rituals and music, social chaos, and a poor reputation, society was in a state of anarchy. When Confucius witnessed the reality of that society with his own eyes, he described the social situation as follows: "The conquest of rituals and music came from the feudal lords." Confucius compared the world at that time to a "Dao free" society. If there is a way in the world, then the conquest of ritual and music will come from the emperor; if there is no way in the world, then the conquest of ritual and music will come from the feudal lords. It is precisely due to the historical background of the collapse of etiquette and music that the social structure of this era, including politics, economy, ideology, morality, and behavior, has suffered tremendous collapse and destruction. In this era, the inheritance and development of Zhou rituals by Confucius had a certain degree of inevitability.[13]

In Confucius' ideological system, "benevolence" and "ritual" constitute the dual dimensions of ethical and political thought. As the ontology of value, 'ren' is not only the highest criterion for governing moral practice, but also the spiritual core of ritual and music civilization, with the inherent transcendence of subject consciousness; As a carrier of the system, "ritual" externalizes abstract morality into an operable governance paradigm through specific norms, presenting objective and real institutional characteristics. Confucius' political ideology revolves around the concept of "benevolence" and emphasizes the ethical extension of blood kinship based on the belief that "benevolent people love others". The political practice at the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty is the true source of Zhou rituals.[14] Zhou Li is a theoretical achievement of the institutionalization of the Western Zhou Dynasty, which should be related to the ruling practice of the early Zhou rulers in resolving real crises, resolving social conflicts, and constructing religious and political identity. The logic of "cultivating oneself to ensure the safety of others" extends family ethics (filial piety and brotherly love) to society and the country, forming a hierarchical pattern of "family, country, and the world". As an external system of "benevolence", "ritual" achieves moral internalization through standardized behavior, such as "self-restraint and restoration of ritual as benevolence", with the ultimate goal of building an ethical political order of "the world has a way". In the Confucian school of thought, "loving others" is not only the core essence of "benevolence", but also constitutes the value foundation of the interaction between social classes. The deep structure of Confucius' thought on the rule of virtue is actually based on the spirit of benevolence and love, shaping a hierarchical ethics with moral warmth within the framework of the ritual system. By embedding the concept of "loving others" into various levels of social relationships, it not only maintains the order of equal status and propriety in governance, but also endows it with the core of moral emotions. This governance wisdom that integrates ethical emotions with institutional norms makes "benevolence" the soul that runs through the system of moral governance.

3. The Practical Path of Order Construction

3.1. Plato's' King of Philosophy 'and the Shift towards Rule of Law

3.1.1. Philosophers govern the country

In Plato's political philosophy framework, the mechanism for achieving justice in city states is rooted in the deep logic of his philosophical system of idealism. Based on the tripartite theory of the soul and the ontological assumption of the ideal world, Plato constructed a unique model of political ethics: the order of the individual's soul (rational control of passion, regulation of desires) and the political structure of the city-state (philosopher king leading guardians, managing producers) form a rigorous ethical topology relationship. This micro macro ethical mirror mapping not only gives political legitimacy to the rule of the philosopher king, but also provides ontological value confirmation. As a concrete existence of ideological rulers, the philosopher king is essentially the earthly agent of the "ultimate good concept". Its transcendence is reflected in three dimensions: understanding the eternal laws of the conceptual world in the cognitive dimension, realizing the absolute domination of reason over desire in the ethical dimension, and achieving the dialectical unity of individual virtue and public good deeds in the practical dimension. Plato, through the institutional design of public ownership of property, fundamentally dissolved the material basis for the growth of rulers' selfish desires, making the governance of the philosophical king completely transcend the interests of the empirical world and become a concrete practice of pure ideas in the political field. When the philosopher king reconstructs the city-state's moral system of "wisdom courage temperance" in political practice based on his tempered rational soul, the entire city-state is elevated to an enlarged soul entity. In this process, the operation of political power is no longer a simple mechanism for distributing interests, but has become a spiritual cultivation field for forging citizens' souls and approaching the concept of the ultimate good. It is precisely this theoretical construction that integrates ontology, ethics, and political science that elevates Plato's ideal of the philosopher king beyond concrete political forms and becomes an eternal normative model in the history of Western political philosophy.

3.1.2. Legal turn

In The Politician, Plato carefully examined the correctness of rule without law.[15] Plato advocated for the rule of the philosopher king in his early years, and shifted towards the rule of law in his later years. He advocated that laws contain "peace and good faith" and should be formulated by philosophers. In the "Laws" section, he stipulated regular military training for citizens to balance the relationship between war and peace. However, his rule of law ultimately served the rational governance framework of the philosopher king. As a prolific thinker and politician, Plato published multiple works throughout his life, and his most core ideological system is reflected in the "Republic" and the "Laws". In the "Republic", philosophers have the highest power in the state, while in the "Laws", law is the highest authority. At the same time, the former implements public ownership within the ruling class, while in the latter, all citizens have their own land and family. The former hates democracy, while the latter has a slight democratic color. Plato believed that as human history developed to a certain extent, law would once again emerge as a foundation. The rule of law is the core content of the Book of Laws, and Plato, as an unfamiliar Athenian, discusses the rule of law with the Cretans and Spartans. The core revolves around various legal issues, such as origin, purpose, role, and essential status, and also discusses why and how to govern the country according to law, providing systematic insights for building a rule of law order.[16]

The purpose of law is to introduce everything into one purpose, which is to give the name of justice to what is called virtue, 'goodness'. The purpose of legislation is to achieve good virtues, in other words, to achieve justice with "goodness" as the goal. Plato believed that virtue is temperance or self-control, not the bravery and war that Spartans and Cretans claim. Temperance can achieve harmony between reason and desire, thereby achieving social harmony and a good social order. People can only achieve virtue through self-discipline by consciously abiding by the law, and the law aims to cultivate the virtues of moderation and law-abiding citizens through education, in order to achieve social order stability.

3.2. Confucius' philosophy of "governing with virtue" and "virtue as the mainstay of punishment"

3.2.1. A wise and virtuous person in politics

Confucius advocated for "governing with virtue" and opposed strict punishments and laws. He believed that "guiding with virtue and regulating with etiquette" could make the people "ashamed and humble". The maintenance of its order relies on the idea of "rectifying names", which means restoring the Zhou ritual through ethical norms of "ruler, subject, father, son", and achieving harmony in social hierarchy. Confucius' political philosophy of "governing with virtue" inherited the Western Zhou Dynasty's "matching virtue with heaven" and further developed it. Tracing back to its

origins, the concept of "matching heaven with virtue" evolved from the Yin and Shang dynasties' concept of "matching heaven with ancestors". These ideas reflect the contemplation of politics, morality, and the relationship between heaven and man in different eras.[17] Confucius believed that a ruler should possess noble morals and advocated for the appointment of wise individuals to participate in the governance of the country. His pursuit of 'governing with morality' is to elevate the moral standards of the entire nation. Compared to the saying "governing with the Dao and punishing with the Qi", Confucius advocated for "governing with the Dao and punishing with the Qi" and "governing with the Dao and punishing with the Qi". He emphasized the effectiveness of cultivating students with virtue and etiquette, which can prevent the people from being shameless. In the Confucian concept of governing the country, "governing with virtue" is the core, which carries the ideal of a holy king, contains comprehensive strategies, and embodies ancient people-oriented political thought.[18]

3.2.2. Morality given priority over penalty

On the basis of inheriting and developing Zhou Gong's idea of "being virtuous and cautious in punishment", Confucius innovatively constructed the legal concept of "virtue as the mainstay and punishment as a supplement". It is worth noting that although this concept holds an important position in the Confucian legal system, it is not its theoretical core. Compared to simply emphasizing the superficial construction of the relationship between morality and punishment, Confucius creatively combined the institutional norms of "ritual" with the value core of "benevolence", which actually constitutes the philosophical foundation and logical starting point of his legal thought. This thinking paradigm that connects ethical values with institutional design not only reflects the abandonment of previous legal thought, but also highlights the important breakthrough of Confucian legal philosophy in theoretical depth. Compared to Zhou Gong's idea of "respecting virtue and punishing with caution", Confucius ultimately completed the return from the concept of divine power to focusing on human hearts, and fully applied the relationship between virtue and punishment to governance through the rule of man. [19] The theory of "morality as the mainstay and punishment as the auxiliary" plays a special role in balancing tension within this institutional framework: by imposing the ethical responsibility of "governing with morality" on rulers, it not only constructs an elastic mechanism to constrain power at the moral level, but also forms a governance wisdom for the transfer of contradictions at the practical level. This thinking approach of replacing institutional constraints with moral discipline not only demonstrates the transcendent development of Confucian legal thought in previous generations, but also exposes the theoretical limitations of traditional legal philosophy in the dimension of power balance. Its ultimate goal is to construct a relatively stable social governance framework through the dialectical treatment of the relationship between morality and punishment, while maintaining hierarchical order.

4. The Civilization Differences in the Extension of Order: The World View and the City State View

4.1. Plato's' Greek centrism '

4.1.1. City states are the only carriers of civilization

Plato regarded the city-state as the only political unit for humanity to achieve justice, and his ideal state was only applicable to Greek city states. In the "Law" section, he clearly divided humanity into "Greeks" and "barbarians", believing that the latter lacked rational autonomy. Plato proposed the myth of "gold, silver, copper, and iron" (Volume 3 of "The Republic"), implying that the Greeks were born with rational endowments, while the barbarians were mostly "iron rich" and needed to be ruled by the Greeks. Militarily, city states maintain their independence through a system of citizen soldiers (such as the Spartan model), and the responsibilities of the guard class include resisting foreign enemies and suppressing slaves (such as the Hylo people). Although Plato called for the cessation of civil wars among Greek city states (Book 5 of the Republic), his alliance was based on the premise of rejecting "Eastern despotism" such as Persia, and its essence was still the internal integration of Greek civilization. Greece established new city states through colonization (such as Syracuse), but the new states needed to replicate the system of the mother state, reject cultural integration, and reflect the thinking of "homogeneous expansion".

4.1.2. The survival logic of maritime civilization

The emergence and development of civilization are closely related to geographical environment. Marine civilization is deeply influenced by the ocean, forming numerous islands. The fragmentation of terrain and the abundance of islands indirectly promote the emergence of many independent small city states.[20] Ancient Greece is a typical maritime civilization. Geographically speaking, the city-state of Athens relied on maritime trade, and various city states had to compete for resources with each other, such as the Black Sea food route, forcing Plato to emphasize military training and class stratification. The dependence on the slave economy led citizens in the city-state to rely on hard work as the basis of leisure, constantly acquiring slaves through external expansion and war to maintain the survival and

development of the ruling class, thus strengthening the binary opposition between civilization and barbarism. Plato's city-state order reflects the competitiveness of the "commercial culture" of maritime civilization.

4.2. Confucius' "Cosmopolitanism"

4.2.1. Family, country and the world

In many Confucian classics such as the Book of Changes, the Book of Songs, the Book of Documents, the Analects, Mencius, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean, the term "Tianxia" contains rich connotations. It not only covers the sum of China and the four regions, but also represents a vast space where humanities and nature blend and converge.[21] Confucius' construction of order is based on family ethics and radiates outward through the hierarchical pattern of "extending oneself to others". The chain of "self-cultivation → family harmony → governance → peace of the world" proposed in "The Great Learning" reflects the logic of Confucianism that connects personal moral cultivation with social order. In the historical process of China, the peak ideal of the concept of the world is "great harmony", which aims to construct a unified multi-ethnic country. This concept is like a cornerstone, endowing Chinese culture with the characteristics of non Chinese ethnic groups and giving birth to the unique cohesion and centripetal force of the Chinese nation. Therefore, division is only a flash in the pan in the long river of Chinese history, and the unity that people desire and tirelessly pursue is the norm and mainstream that runs through it.

4.2.2. The practical foundation of agricultural civilization

Chinese civilization is a typical agricultural civilization, and the agricultural society in the Yellow River Basin relies on stable land relations and clan cooperation, which has given birth to the ethical order of "settling for the land and valuing relocation". In the face of sudden disasters, the management of Yellow River floods requires large-scale cooperation, which strengthens the sense of community of "the world is for all" (Book of Rites, Book of Rites). Confucius' ideas were related to the feudal agricultural economy and the patriarchal system based on blood ties, which adapted to the needs of absolute monarchy and reflected the social changes of the time.[22] Confucius' Great Harmony philosophy embodies the inclusiveness of "family culture".

5. Comparison of Political Thought between Plato and Confucius

5.1. Similarities

5.1.1. Antiquity

Plato advocated for the reconstruction of city states and the maintenance of monarchy; Confucius advocated the restoration of Zhou rituals and the maintenance of slavery. Plato and Confucius were both in turbulent times and periods of social change and transformation. They had the same historical environment and faced the same problems. They put forward the "idealism" and "benevolence" theories from their respective perspectives, which were helpful in maintaining the ruling class. Confucius' ideological system upholds the interests of slave owners and nobles, with the aim of restoring and maintaining the feudal, hierarchical, and hereditary system of Zhou slavery. Plato and Confucius demonstrated cross-cultural ideological resonance in their political concepts. As the maintainer of the hierarchical system, Plato constructed a strict social stratification theory in "The Republic": dividing the essence of human virtues into three types: wisdom, bravery, and temperance, and based on this, dividing them into three levels: rulers, guardians, and producers. He believed that only a wise political system led by a philosopher king could achieve justice in the city-state, while democracy was merely a chaotic political system that indulged desires. This criticism developed into the theory of mixed political systems in his "Laws". It is worth noting that Plato regarded moral practice as a citizen privilege, and free citizens engaged in material production only needed to possess the virtue of moderation, while the slave class was completely excluded from the moral subject. This elitist political view echoes Confucius' hierarchical ethics of "not bowing down to commoners" across time and space. Both attempt to maintain a specific social order through moral ethics, but Confucius relies on the Zhou dynasty's patriarchal system, while Plato is rooted in the Greek city-state tradition.

5.1.2. Hierarchical order

Plato proposed three levels; Confucius emphasized the Three Obediences and Five Constants. Plato divided citizens into three levels: philosophers, guardians, and producers. Philosophers are the highest level, while agriculture, industry, and commerce are the lowest level. Each of the three levels has their own responsibilities, and those with lower levels must obey those with higher levels, maintain order, and cooperate in division of labor. Only in this way can there be justice. Confucius' "ritual" pursues an orderly hierarchy of status, where the emperor is the emperor, the vassals are the vassals,

and the officials are the officials. The ruler, subjects, father, son, and son must abide by the laws of ritual and cannot overstep their bounds. The ideal of Plato's Republic is to pursue 'justice'. Undoubtedly, Plato and Confucius both stood on the standpoint of nobility and aimed to maintain the established hierarchical order. They all affirmed that social stratification is inevitable; At the same time, it is believed that there is a distinction between high and low social classes, and there is only one ruler at the highest level; Crossing and mobility between classes are prohibited. People from different classes have their own exclusive responsibilities, and each class should perform their own duties. It is forbidden to "take over" and engage in work that does not belong to their own class; Personal cultivation is one of the foundations of an ideal society. In addition to the mutual cooperation of various classes at a macro level, individual moral qualities must be able to support the stable and orderly operation of society.

5.1.3. Politics of the virtuous

Plato's philosophy of the philosopher king and Confucius' ideal of the holy king constitute a bimodal confrontation between Eastern and Western moral ethics. The "philosopher king" paradigm constructed by Plato in "The Republic" is essentially pushing Socrates' proposition of "knowledge is virtue" into political practice - only philosophers who master the truth of the conceptual world can use the light of reason to break the illusion of the cave and achieve justice in the city-state through geometrically precise governance techniques. This rational governance view emphasizes that the wisdom and virtue of rulers must be based on dialectical training, and their governance strategies include both a systematic education program for cultivating guardians and institutional design for public ownership of property. Confucius developed the practical rationality of "unity of the holy king" in the historical narrative of "Zushu Yao and Shun". He anchored the foundation of political order to the moral appeal of rulers, believing that "governing with virtue". The sentence is: Just as the North Star resides in its place and all stars share it, the governance effect of "pleasing those who are close and coming from afar" can naturally be achieved through the king's self-restraint and self-cultivation. This kind of thinking approach, which opens up the inner sage and the outer king, places the ethical consciousness of "benevolence" above the logical deduction of "knowledge". Its practical wisdom of "cultivating oneself to benefit the people" focuses more on the emotional resonance of moral subjects rather than the systematic construction of abstract concepts.

5.2. Dissimilarity

Confucius' benevolence emphasizes the interests of the world and the nation, while Plato's political thought only emphasizes the unity of the Athenian city states, rather than the unity of the entire Greece. Unlike Plato's theory of city-state justice constructed through rationality in The Republic, Confucius established "benevolence" as the core value that connects heaven and man, and integrates the masses and oneself - it is not only an individual self-cultivation principle of "self-restraint and restoration of propriety as benevolence", but also a political practice program of "generously benefiting the masses". This virtue philosophy based on emotional ethics has successfully elevated the kinship and kinship of the patriarchal society to a universal principle of "universal love for the masses", making "benevolence" the hub connecting ritual norms and moral consciousness. From the perspective of political philosophy, the study of "benevolence" creatively achieved three transformations: at the level of value theory, it transformed the traditional "respect for virtue" of the feudal aristocracy of the Zhou Dynasty into moral laws accessible to the whole nation; At the practical level, elevate the governance paradigm of "governing with morality" from a governing technique to a governance paradigm of "cultivating oneself to ensure the safety of the people"; At the teleological level, the ultimate political ideal of transcending feudal separatism is set as' the return of the world to benevolence '. This governance wisdom based on moral subjectivity not only gave birth to the classical people-oriented ideology of "putting the people first", but also provided ethical footnotes for the political legitimacy of traditional China through the concept of "benevolent governance".

Due to the geographical location, historical background, and local customs of China and the West, there are differences. China is a vast land with abundant resources and is an agricultural country, which makes China pay more attention to "harmony". Greece is a maritime civilization, small and scattered, which has created their "scattered" culture, which has also influenced the political thought patterns of Confucius and Plato. Unlike Plato's concept of limiting the rule of the philosopher king to the city-state community, Confucius' theory of "benevolence" has significant temporal and spatial extension. Faced with the fragmented pattern of the Spring and Autumn period where "ritual and music conquests emerged from the feudal lords", Confucius constructed a political imagination of the "world system" based on the Zhou ritual. His strategy of "cultivating culture and virtue" implies a cultural community consciousness that transcends regional limitations. This integrated logic of replacing military conquest with moral inspiration is in sharp contrast to Plato's closed model emphasizing the self-sufficiency of the city-state in "The Law", reflecting the unique thinking trait of "transforming into the world" in Chinese civilization.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the political theories of Plato and Confucius both emerged during the turbulent Axis era, advocating for retro reform, wise governance, and hierarchical order, emphasizing elite rule and class division of labor. However, the two are divided due to differences in their cultural genes: Confucius used "benevolent governance" as a link to construct the ideal of "great harmony in the world", advocating for cultural integration beyond regions through moral inspiration; Plato designed a closed model of the Athenian city-state with rationality, pursuing geometric justice led by the philosopher king. This comparison reveals the deep characteristics of political philosophy in the East and the West - the former emphasizes ethical expansion and people-oriented care, while the latter emphasizes institutional rationality and city-state autonomy. The ideological dialogue between the two not only reflects the diverse interpretations of "justice" in both the East and the West, but also provides complementary resources for contemporary political civilization: drawing on Plato's professional governance wisdom, activating Confucius' tradition of moral governance, and helping to construct a Chinese social justice theory that combines cultural subjectivity and global perspective, providing a historical mirror for exploring the balance between order and morality.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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