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Main Principles of the Early Confucian Concept of “State”

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the early Chinese writings, attributed to the Confucian school in respect of concepts referring to “state”. The Confucian school of the Zhou dynasty period developed an unique political philosophy and idea of “state” that had profound influence on whole Chinese political culture. Text below shows what were the terms denoting “state” and what were the concepts on the essence of state, state’s politics and person of good ruler, how they changed and evolved in each of the early Confucian text and answers the question if such notion of state has common points with today recognized theory of state. Paper also explains, how ancient Chinese regarded and understood differences between “Chinese” states and states settled by people of non-Chinese origin.

The main concern of this paper is the early Confucian concept of state, which is an important part of the Confucian political thought, that had been evolving during the period of the Zhou dynasty, namely from the thirteenth century B.C. till the year 221 B.C., when China was unified under the rule of the so-called First Emperor. At that time, China was no single unified state, but it consisted of a number of smaller or larger states and Confucian philosophy wasn’t yet an official state ideology, as it became during the Han dynasty period and later on. Also, at that time in China there existed many other philosophical schools, presenting various ideas on life, society, politics and of course – on the state itself, particularly the Legist school (*Fajia*), whose philosophy became an official state ideology of the First Emperor and was based on ruling the state by means of rigid law and cruel punishments. Thus, presenting in this paper the main Confucian principles of “state” from the Zhou dynasty period is aimed at understanding better the whole, also modern, Chinese political philosophy.

Analysis presented in this paper is based on some early Chinese writings, attributed by Chinese tradition to the Confucian school of the Zhou dynasty period, namely: *Shang shu* 尚書 (*The Book of Documents*), *Shi jing* 詩經 (*The Book of Odes*), *Lunyu* 論語 (*Confucian Analects*), *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (*Traditions of Zuo*), *Guo yu* 國語 (*Tales from different states*) and *Mengzi* 孟子 (*Mencius*). Books omitted in this research are: *Yijing* 易經 (*The Book of Changes*), due to the lack of any coherent ideas referring to “state” and *Xunzi* 荀子, considering that political concepts of Xun Qing are more similar to the philosophy of the Legist school.

Analysis of the early Chinese writings, attributed to the Confucian school, in respect to concepts referring to “state” reveals that in earlier writings there are only general terms which could denote “state”, such as *tianxia* 天下 (“all under heaven”) or *sihaizhinei* 四海之內 (“all within four seas”), describing all territories known to the ancient Chinese, and one more precise term – *bang* 邦, meaning “a feudal fief”, granted by a Zhou king to his vassals. However, concepts related to these terms are much unclear and reveal no coherent idea of “state”.

In the later Zhou period, feudal fiefs gained much independence from the Zhou kings and became separate political entities. We can also find that in later texts of the Confucian school the term *bang* is no longer used, but it is replaced by the term *guo* 國, which can be understood as “state”. What is interesting, the character *bang* 邦 consists of two elements – “hand” (*shou* 手) and “town” (*yi* 邑) (which means the king giving his vassal a town, as a key part of a fief, to rule it) and the character *guo* is built of three elements – “weapon” (*ge* 戈) and “one” (*yi* 一), which are encircled by a square, meaning “walls” or “borders” (*wei* 圍), which – according to the ancient Chinese dictionaries – means “using force to defend unity within the borders (or within a certain territory)”. This is very important, because according to a modern legal science, one of the main features of “state” is that it is a compulsory organization, which implies, that under certain circumstances it is entitled to use force against people living on its territory.

In the first text, *The Book of Documents*, the only term that could denote state is the term *bang*, meaning “feudal fief” – and in fact – as the text of the book shows – it is regarded as a political entity subjected to kings of the Zhou dynasty. Ruler of *bang* is understood as the main part of its political structure and as a direct owner of *bang*. However, the main idea about *bang* in *The Book of Documents* is the proper way of governing it. This idea is based on the belief that *bang* is well-governed only when the ruler is a person of high moral qualifications, who treats people in a benevolent way, exerts powerful moral influence on them and takes the whole responsibility for the state’s prosperity and well-being of the people. Therefore, ruling the state is regarded in *The Book of Documents* more as a moral leadership rather than as exercising political power on the society.

In the next text – *The Book of Odes* – we find that “state” is understood in a very similar way as in *The Book of Documents*. Still, the term *bang* is the only term that could be related to “state” and the ruler of *bang* is described as a virtuous man of high moral principles. Existence and prosperity of *bang* is directly related to the ruler’s ability

to govern his people in a benevolent and proper way. However, in *The Book of Odes*, similarly as in *The Book of Documents*, all ideas are directed not to a single *bang*, but to all *bangs* which together constitute the Zhou dynasty's political realm.

In *Lunyu* or *Confucian Analects*, *bang* is also the main term denoting "state". However, in this book we find three elements described by a modern legal science as the key features of "state", namely: territory (called in *Lunyu bangyu* 邦域), people settled on this territory (called *bangren* 邦人) and political power represented by the ruler (called *bangjun* 邦君). According to the text of *Lunyu*, attributed to Confucius, *bang*, which is governed in a proper way and where the ruler is virtuous, possesses an important moral character, and only such *bang* has the right to exist. Just like Aristotle differentiated between good and evil political systems, Confucius and his disciples believed that only a state, which is of moral character, called *dao* 道, can prevail and thrive, and a state which has no *dao*, and is ruled by an oppressive king, who has no respect to moral principles, is doomed to extinction. This is very important because it shows that in the early Confucian political thought, the axiological dimension of state becomes the key issue.

In the *Zuo zhuan* or *Traditions of Zuo*, the term *bang* is no longer used and is replaced by the term *guo*, which can be understood as "state" in a modern sense. In *Zuo zhuan* we find many phrases describing various features of state *guo*, like: small *guo*, large *guo*, friendly *guo*, enemy *guo*, powerful *guo*, or the politics of *guo*, such as: to gain power in *guo*, to destroy *guo*, the government of *guo* etc. This shows that in comparison to *bang*, *guo* is regarded as a political entity of higher level of political development and significance. As for the concepts related to *guo* in *Zuo zhuan*, the moral aspect of state becomes the key point of political ideas. According to the text of *Zuo zhuan*, the moral character of *guo*, so important to Confucius, is created not only by the person of a virtuous ruler, but most of all by his ability to rule the state in a proper way, by granting official posts to noble men, respecting Confucian rituals and laws, safeguarding interests of *guo* and putting people's well-being above all. Moreover, in *Zuo zhuan*, the ruler is no longer regarded as a direct owner of the state, but as the highest representative of the institution of state, and his mission is understood as serving the people and the state.

A similar notion of state we find in another book attributed to the Confucian school, namely in *Guo yu* or *Tales from different states*. Just like in *Zuo zhuan*, here *guo* is believed to be an institution of a certain moral dimension, that should be ruled by virtuous and able men, where traditional rituals and laws should be observed and where the ruling class should set patterns of proper moral conduct for all people. From the texts of *Guo yu* we learn that the most important issue of governing the state well is the ruler's proper attitude towards managing state affairs and towards people. In *Guo yu*, well-being of the people is also stressed as the most important issue that should be put above any other state affair and above the ruler himself.

The last text of the Confucian writings of the Zhou dynasty period, *Mengzi* or *Mencius*, presents the most important ideas of the early Confucian concept of state. Mencius, one of the greatest Confucian philosophers, stated directly in his book that *guo* is a unity consisting of three elements – territory, people settled on it and the political power, which

are the most precious things for the ruler and without any of these elements *guo* cannot be treated as a state. Such a statement corresponds directly to today’s recognized theory of state, conceived by the German philosopher, Georg Jellinek, at the beginning of the twentieth century, who pointed out, that those three elements are essential for the state’s existence, and each of them is indispensable. In *Mengzi* we also find a clear statement of *Mencius*, stressing that in exercising political power in a state, the most important issue is welfare of the people, other state affairs and the state itself are of secondary meaning and the person of the ruler is of the lowest importance. This is the key concept summarizing ideas concerning proper way of governing the state, expressed in previous writings.

The early Confucian philosophers believed that moral character of a state is based upon the person of its ruler, who, by cultivating traditional virtues, exerts a powerful moral influence on all people. Virtues such as benevolence, righteousness and honesty are said by them to be solid foundations of a state, and should be embodied in the ruler’s everyday deeds. Therefore, according to these philosophers, a state, by person of its ruler, sets patterns of proper moral conduct, which are consequently followed by the people, and thus harmony prevails in a society and state is then governed in a right and proper way. Such an idea, where state is understood not as an instrument of exercising political control over the society, but as the means of having moral influence on people and creating a certain moral order, became a dominant feature of the Chinese political culture, which can be seen even in some developments of today’s Chinese politics. The idea of “state” developed by the early Confucian thought can be regarded as an original contribution to the world’s political theory, especially in comparison to the notion of “state” that prevails in the western world, where the state is believed to be a non-ideological institution.

It is worth mentioning also a few general terms, that – to some extent – could be understood as “state” and which in the Zhou dynasty period functioned as descriptions of all territories discovered by the ancient Chinese and believed by them to be a part of what we today name “China”. These terms are *sihaizhinei* 四海之内 (“all within four seas”), *sifang* 四方 (“four directions”) and *tianxia* 天下 (“all under heaven”). The term *tianxia*, which we encounter virtually in all Confucian writings, meant something more than a territory. The Confucian philosophers of that time believed that heaven was only above the lands settled by the Chinese people and most of all – lands that were under a profound influence of the Chinese civilization – whereas barbarians living on the peripheries of Chinese states had no heaven above them and were culturally inferior to the Chinese. Thus, *tianxia* was supposed to be a kind of civilization-state comprising all states and fiefs, where the Chinese culture was dominant. However, modern research shows that *tianxia* functioned only as a theoretical project and not as a real political entity. In later Confucian texts of the Zhou period we also find the term *zhongguo* 中國 (“middle states”) meaning all *guo* states that culturally were *par excellence* “Chinese” and which were believed to be the representatives of the traditional Chinese civilization. The *Zhongguo* states were set in opposition to *manyizhiguo* 蠻夷之國 – barbarian states, representing inferior culture and presenting hostile attitude towards the Chinese people.

Although *tianxia* and *zhongguo* do not denote “state” in a modern sense, their presence in the early Chinese writings shows the evolution of cultural and ethnic consciousness of the ancient Chinese.

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