Unique Terminology in Chinese Political and Military Ethics

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During the past summer, I have had my first opportunity to look at some classical Chinese philosophical texts, primarily through the lens of understanding their implications for political and military ethics. Here are two observations borne out of a novice reflection on them.

1. The conception of "the people" varies throughout the different Chinese philosophical schools.

Reading the Analects, the Mencius, and the Mozi, the most obvious point of difference with regard to how the object of political and military ethics is conceived is between the Confucian min (民) and the Mohist ren (人). Both terms can be translated as “the people”, that is to say, those whom the political leader must consider in the midst of action.

For Confucius and Mencius, the people as min puts into focus the community-specific relationship between the governing and the governed. In the Analects, the people as min are usually brought up in a context where the discussion centres on how the political leader is to get the people to willingly obey him. Confucius’ answers reflect his perception of the act of governance as identical to correction or rectification ("政者，正也"2). The paternalistic connotations are developed more fully by Mencius, who explicitly described the roots of the State as being in the family ("国之本在家"3). The exercise of authority thus entails a duty of care, not just in terms of the provision of material well-being, but also in terms of the educative exemplification of character development. The political leader is a provider at the same time as he is a moral exemplar. The political activity of war is thought of in a similar fashion, where the people of the territory one may be militarily involved in have to be considered as min too, that is to say, deserving of being in a proper relationship between the governing and the governed. What this means in practice is that the people as min must desire to be on the receiving end of the one who militarily intervenes, and that the latter has a responsibility to manage the welfare of the former as well.

Mozi evidently had a radically different conception of the people. By drawing attention to one's duty to the universal ren or person in his first chapter against offensive war5, he de-emphasized the particular relationship a ruler has with his people. His condemnation of all offensive war was extrapolated from his assertion that individual murder is morally reprehensible. In so doing, he also demonstrated that by removing the importance of relational context, the duty of the ruler to sustain individual life qua bios becomes primary, in place of the Confucian duty of governance as correction. However, the common thread through Confucian and Mohist thought with reference to “the people” is that they were still articulated as separate from the ruler. The ruler's agency was prior to that of “the people”. The latter were more acted upon than being able to act.

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1 The Analects, Wei Zheng, 19 & 20 [论语，为政，19 & 20]
2 The Analects, Yan Yuan, 17 [论语，颜渊，17]
3 The Mencius, Li Lou I, 5 [孟子，离娄上，5]
4 The Mencius, Liang Hui Wang I, 17 & 18 [孟子，梁惠王下，17 & 18]
5 Mozi, Condemnation of Offensive War I [墨子，非攻上]
Through a casual reading of some of Mao Zedong’s works, “the people” take on another light, as qun zhong (群众), sometimes translated as “the masses”, or ren min (人民). Unlike the Confucian min or the Mohist ren, Mao’s use of “the people” does not incorporate a totality of people under rule. It neither emphasizes the special ruler-related relationship of min nor the universal individuality of ren. Instead, it draws from Communist vocabulary, often juxtaposing itself against “counterrevolutionaries” (反动派) and other similar terms. Yet, unlike Confucius or Mozi, there is a self-conscious ambiguity surrounding Mao’s use of “the people”. In 1957, he noted that the content of “the people” depended on circumstances of time and place, and asserted support of the socialist revolution at that moment as the criteria on which it turns. Additionally, although he places plenty of emphasis on supporting the material well-being of people in warfare, it comes across as a mere tactic to facilitate their mobilization for revolutionary goals, which are, granted, asserted a priori as being for the people’s good. I posit that Mao’s novel use of “the people” in his political ethics is comprehensible in light of the fact that contrary to the audience of Confucius or Mozi who were already established rulers, Mao had to improvise from an insurrectionist standpoint against perceived oppression. As such, he chose not to immediately assume the Confucian ruler-related relationship as given, nor to adopt a more detached Mohist universal perspective, and fell back on an instrumental and ambiguous use of “the people”. More research can definitely be done to either build on this position, or to examine how the use of “the people” in politico-ethical discourse has evolved from Mao’s rhetoric given the Chinese Communist Party’s rule for over half a century. At the same time, it is also worth mulling over whether the Confucian min or the Mohist ren has any remaining resonance in contemporary Chinese political practice.

2. The conception of virtue and its relation to a larger cosmology is similarly diverse throughout the different schools.

Another point of contention in the Chinese classical texts with reference to political ethics has to do with what constitutes virtue. Specifically, how the Mencius thinks about ren (仁), sometimes translated as benevolence, is markedly different from the Daodejing’s treatment of it, especially in how it relates to larger cosmological forces like Heaven (天) or dao (道).

Mencius, influenced by Confucius, saw ren as the fundamental virtue in political life. However, exactly what ren entails is only alluded to tangentially. In the context of the family, Mencius describes ren as producing the obedience of one’s parents and elder siblings. It is not unreasonable to surmise then that an important aspect of ren is the ability to know and perform one’s social role, particularly in a given hierarchy. Confucius stated a version of this in the Analects when asked about government (“君君，臣臣，父父，子子”). Without ren, rule cannot be preserved. Asymmetrically, the possession of ren itself may not necessarily lead to rule. That is left to the will of Heaven that is expressed amongst other indicators through the acceptance by the

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6 On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People (27 February 1957) 〔关于正确处理人民内部矛盾的问题（一九五七年二月二十七日）〕
7 Be Concerned with the Well-Being of the Masses, Pay Attention to Methods of Work (27 January 1934) 〔关心群众生活，注意工作方法（一九三四年一月二十七日）〕
8 The Mencius, Li Lou I, 27 [孟子, 离娄上, 27]
9 The Analects, Yan Yuan, 11 [论语, 颜渊, 11]
10 The Mencius, Li Lou I, 3 [孟子, 离娄上, 3]
11 The Mencius, Liang Hui Wang II, 21 [孟子, 梁惠王下, 21]; Wan Zhang I, 5 [万章上, 5]
people of the proposed ruler’s authority. The relationship between the people and Heaven here must be contrasted with a statement made by Mao Zedong in 1945, where he remarked that the Party’s perseverance will move the heart of God, whom he equated with the Chinese people (“我们一定要坚持下去，一定要不断地工作，我们也会感动上帝的。这个上帝不是别人，就是全中国的人民大众。”[12]). Mao’s evocation of the divine was a rhetorical flourish on a causal relationship that was guaranteed to happen, as opposed to the Mencian use of Heaven to describe an externalized force that has ultimate say in what eventually happens, regardless of the will of human beings. There appears to be some continuity from Mao’s thinking in today’s context. In a 1996 article written by academics within the PLA[13], “Chinese” military thinking is characterized as being distinct from “Western” military thinking in that the former values the “human factor” over the “weapon factor”. That is to say that the decisive factor for military victory is the will of the people as it is expressed in “its unbeatable national spirit” instead of the unpredictably destructive nature of modern weaponry. Yet, the authors also note that Chinese strategists may be rethinking their position, especially after the use of high-tech weapons during the First Gulf War in 1991. It may thus be worth interrogating the extent to which Mao’s humanistic determinism still holds sway within contemporary Chinese political discourse, or whether there is a resurgence in the role of an externalized force uncontrollable by human beings, be it Heaven or chance.

In Mencian philosophy, Heaven decides the constitution of ren, which human beings have a duty to acquire through training[14]. In Daoist philosophy, Heaven itself is subservient to the dao, a primeval force that is the origin of all things[15], and ren is merely a by-product of the failure of all to observe the dao[16]. The Daoist scepticism of ren emerges as a suspicion that learning may produce hypocrisy and even more evil. Daoism agrees with Confucius and Mencius to the extent that there are cosmological rules regarding the exercise of authority to which human beings must willingly subject themselves. Yet, while Confucius and Mencius saw the ruler-rulled relationship as one demanding paternalistic care, Lao Tzu, the pre-eminent Daoist, saw the essence of governance in not governing[17], or in other words, in not aiming to develop or regulate the people’s actions as they give cause to the propagation of human desire. With regard to military affairs, recognising that warfare is regrettable, Lao Tzu advises that military action be stopped once a decisive result is observed, without extending to a complete mastery over the opposing forces[18]. The Daoist military virtue is therefore one of intense restraint, that stems from a personal drive to rid oneself of acquisitive desire, as against the Confucian virtue of trying to preserve the continuation of the proper type of ruler-rulled relationships.

Speaking of virtues, examining the Legalist work of Han Fei Zi may be important to better understand the classical Chinese landscape in terms of political and military virtue. Seeing how these classical Chinese political virtues then compare against Machiavelli’s notion of fortuna and virtù may also be instructive insofar as these concepts were similarly developed in the midst of general political chaos in a religiously minded world. Perhaps, such a comparison could be useful in

[12] The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains (11 June 1945) [愚公移山（一九四五年六月十一日）]
[14] The Mencius, Jin Xin II, 70 [孟子，尽心下，70]
[15] Daodejing, 1
[16] Daodejing, 18
[17] Daodejing, 57
[18] Daodejing, 30
illuminating a common appreciation for what virtue is, should virtue be seen to be invaluable to how ethics is practiced today.

There is clearly much more that can be gleaned from the texts that I have mentioned, and indeed many more texts that I have yet to read and think about as well. I only hope the above provides a reasonable starting point for beginners such as myself to explore and come to grips with the wide-ranging world of Chinese ethical thought.

Classical Chinese texts and their English translations can be found at the following: http://ctext.org/ens

And links to Mao Zedong's speeches and writings are as follows: https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/index.htm; https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/index.htm