

# The Enlightenment of Ancient Chinese Clean Government Thought on the Construction of Clean Government Culture Today

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**Abstract:** *In today's era, the construction of clean governance has become a global issue related to the stability of political power and the sustainable development of politics and economy in various countries and regions around the world. However, the emergence and development of any scientific system have complex and profound ideological and historical origins. This article attempts to analyze the concept of clean governance in traditional Chinese culture, such as the Confucian concept of "governing by virtue", the Mohist concept of "frugality", and the Legalist concept of "governing by law". Based on the situation and requirements of anti-corruption and anti-corruption construction in the new era, this article aims to extract the essence that can serve today by drawing on the positive impact of simple clean governance ideas or viewpoints in traditional culture in governing the country, and provide some positive countermeasures for the construction of anti-corruption systems in various countries around the world.*

**Keywords:** *Ancient China; Traditional culture; Clean government ideology*

## 1. Introduction

In the vast historical literature of ancient China, "clean government" is an important concept, representing a political ideology and a noble moral behavior, which has always been revered by sages and gentlemen[1]. It is the continuous accumulation, development, and innovation of ancient anti-corruption ideas that have formed a relatively rich culture of ancient Chinese anti-corruption. According to the earliest existing historical document in China, the "Shangshu", Emperor Yao's governing ideology already had multi-level meanings such as being diligent in politics and loving the people. This indicates that the concept of clean governance was born at the beginning. With the gradual maturity of the national form, the concept of clean governance gradually formed. By the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the concept of clean governance began to develop in a diversified way. The various schools of thought in the pre Qin period have diverse opinions on "clean governance", with the most representative being the four schools of thought: Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism, and Legalism. Their ideas on clean governance have had a profound impact on the construction of clean governance culture in later generations.

Confucian culture is the mainstream of traditional Chinese culture, among which the core of Confucian anti-corruption ideology is the idea of morality as the foundation for governance, honesty as the foundation, and honesty as the prerequisite for anti-corruption [2]. The ideas of "rule of etiquette" and "rule of virtue" were first advocated by Confucius, the representative of Confucianism. He proposed ideas such as "the government is upright", "benevolent people love others", and "cultivating oneself to ensure the safety of the people". The Mohist school was the most "people-oriented" school of thought during the Warring States period, proposing ideas such as universal love, non-aggression, upholding virtue, and frugality. It can be seen that what they advocated was a harmonious society of peace, democracy, equality, fraternity, wise people in power, and advocating thrift. Among the pre Qin philosophers, Legalism can be said to be the school that values the law the most, advocating for "governing the country with the law". In their anti-corruption ideology, they advocate starting from the greedy nature of human beings, abolishing the privileges of nobles and landlords, establishing official positions in the system, strengthening supervision, and preventing the occurrence of corruption. It can be seen that the integrity ideology of Legalism is more mandatory and restrictive than the previous three factions. From the perspective of modern rule of law, some of its contents in the anti-corruption system, anti-corruption education, and even the practice of officials' anti-corruption behavior are worthy of our research and reference.

It can be said that the ancient Chinese concept of clean governance is a precious spiritual wealth of the Chinese nation. It not only played an important role in the formation of ancient Chinese political civilization and the development of political society, but also has profound reference significance for the smooth construction of clean governance culture and anti-corruption construction in the world today.

## **2. The Main Content of Ancient Chinese Clean Government Thought**

### ***2.1 The Clean Government Thought of Confucian Culture of 'Governance with Virtue'***

In the history of Chinese political ideology, Confucianism, represented by Confucius and Mencius, holds a very important position. Especially Confucius' proposition of "governing by virtue" has been highly praised by rulers of all dynasties. Confucius believed that only by governing the country with morality can we establish a harmonious and stable social order and achieve peace in the world.

Firstly, the cultivation and exercise of political ethics. Confucianism, represented by Confucius, places great emphasis on the role of moral cultivation in politics, believing that politics and morality should be integrated. The fundamental issue in politics is first and foremost the issue of ethics and morality, which requires rulers to have a sense of integrity. Confucius believes that the actions of state rulers have a decisive role in society, whether the behavior of the people is standardized and meets the moral requirements of the country. It often depends on the moral influence and charisma of the ruler himself.

Secondly, morality and criminal policy. Confucius emphasized that governing a country should be based on morality and supplemented by punishment and politics. Morality is higher than criminal policy, and governance is a process of moral influence. He believes that the relationship between monarchs and ministers is not just a matter of power constraints, but also needs to be maintained by moral principles such as propriety, righteousness, loyalty, and trustworthiness. It is necessary to achieve the goal of "the ruler instructs the minister with propriety, and the minister serves the ruler with loyalty." (The Analects of Confucius, Yan Hui) advocates that in politics, moral cultivation should be emphasized, morality should be prioritized over punishment, and rule of virtue should be taken as the dominant principle, that is, to govern the country with morality, educate the people with etiquette and music, and make people self regulate and self restrain.

Thirdly, the moral standard of 'seeking justice for profit'. Honesty and dishonesty, in the final analysis, are how to treat public and private, righteousness and profit. Those who take pride in themselves and serve the public must be honest, while those who allow their selfish desires to expand will inevitably be insatiable. Greedy people who have mastered a certain amount of power will inevitably use their power for personal gain and corrupt the law. Dealing with the relationship between righteousness and profit is an important guarantee for political integrity. Confucius believed that righteousness and profit are first and foremost intertwined. Smart and kind-hearted people should first satisfy the public interest, and then obtain corresponding benefits from it. It can be seen that Confucius did not oppose individuals obtaining legitimate interests, but opposed individuals forgetting righteousness and prioritizing interests before righteousness. Secondly, in the event of a conflict between righteousness and self-interest, public interest should be placed first and private interest should be placed in the second place. It is important to "think for what is good" and never go against public morality to pursue private interest. In short, rulers should promote the rule of virtue and benevolent governance, and in specific actions, they should first focus on righteousness and then on the interests and requirements of the people, in order to obtain their own legitimate interests. Only in this way can their ruling behavior be moral and can they gain the support of the people.

Fourthly, 'recruiting talented individuals'. Confucius believed that the purity of official governance directly affects the realization of moral and benevolent governance. For this reason, he pays special attention to talent issues and places the selection of talents in an important position. Advocating that rulers should pay attention to selecting talented individuals to assist in politics, and should not allow evil people to engage in management work. Confucius said: By recommending upright people as officials, the common people will be convinced; Otherwise, the people will not be willing to obey. Placing upright people above evil people can lead them to change their ways. On the issue of selecting virtuous individuals, Confucius believed that "one should not use words to criticize others, nor should one use unnecessary words to criticize others." (The Analects of Confucius, Duke Wei Linggong) Neither should one be selected because they are good at speaking, nor should one not listen to their correct opinions due to their low status. Instead, one should listen to their words and observe their actions, in order to select

truly talented and politically capable individuals as officials[3-4].

### ***2.2 The Clean Government Thought of the Mohist School with the Proposition of "frugality"***

Mo Zhai, also known as Mozi, the founder of the Mohist school, was born into the working people and never completely separated from labor. He has always been very concerned about the economic life of the country and workers. In Mozi, there are many meaningful insights into major economic and political issues related to the national economy and people's livelihood. There are also unique insights in its theory of integrity.

Firstly, the viewpoint of "frugal governance". Confucius opposed excessive exploitation by the ruling class and proposed the idea of "frugality". Mozi further proposed the concept of "frugal governance" based on Confucius' ideology of "frugality", with "frugality" as its fundamental proposition. Thrift is one of the essence of Chinese traditional culture, and it is also the basic virtue of being a person, an official and a politician. Frugality leads to diligence, integrity, and purity. Therefore, "frugality" is a moral guarantee for serving the monarch and ministers, being honest and upright, and being diligent in governing and loving the people. Mozi's frugality theory is not simply about solving economic and financial problems from the perspective of consumption. He attaches great importance to production and believes that production is the foundation of wealth and the prerequisite for use. Mozi combines material production with human production. Due to the productivity situation at that time, human resources themselves were the driving force of production, indicating that the number of people was a decisive factor in ensuring production and increasing social wealth. Therefore, Mozi advocated that rulers of various countries encourage population production, thereby promoting the increase of social production and means of living, in order to achieve the accumulation of social wealth.

Secondly, we strongly oppose the concept of "frugality" in waste. Mozi believed that while social production has developed, it is also necessary to save consumption. On the one hand, consumption has a certain level, which is appropriate to meet the basic needs of life. On the other hand, consumption should be conducive to reproduction. Saving is the way to accumulate wealth. Mozi strongly opposed waste and fiercely criticized it. In 'Non Music', he did not oppose normal cultural entertainment, but criticized the rulers' various corrupt lives characterized by song, dance, sound, and lust. For example, the trend of thick burials was prevalent in various feudal states at that time. Mozi pointed out that the extravagance and waste of rulers greatly destroyed the reproduction of material and human beings, and caused political corruption. If extravagance is excessive, then "the country will inevitably be poor, the people will be widowed, and the punishment and politics will be chaotic" ("Mozi · Jieyong"). The theory of frugality has very obvious pertinence and practicality.

Finally, attach importance to upholding virtue and the rule of law. He said, "If there are a large number of virtuous and virtuous people, the governance of the country is thick; if there are few virtuous and virtuous people, the governance of the country is thin." ("Mozi Shangxian Shangshang") When selecting talents, regardless of their status and background, as long as they have moral character and talent, they should be vigorously promoted. When appointing officials, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive examination of the selected candidates, "listen to their words, follow their actions, observe their abilities, and be cautious in appointing officials" ("Mozi Shangxianzhong"). In terms of the rule of law, Mozi believed that "those who engage in the world cannot be unable to conform. Those who are unable to conform and their actions can be accomplished have nothing." ("Mozi's" Legalism ") [5]believed that the fundamental manifestation of the rule of law lies in clear rewards and punishments.

### ***2.3 Legalism's Clean Government Thought of "Governing by Law"***

In the thoughts of the pre Qin philosophers, there was also a Legalist school that emphasized the idea of governing the country by law. The common characteristic of the Legalists is their special emphasis on the role of law in governing the country, believing that law is the only way to govern a country, and everything is determined by law. In the view of the Legalist school, 'honesty' means sacrificing oneself to forget death and despising wealth. For example, Yanzi believed that rulers can only consolidate their ruling position and achieve long-term social stability by implementing clean governance. The clean governance ideology of Legalism with the rule of law as its core mainly includes:

Most importantly, clean governance lies in conforming to the hearts of the people. Legalism places obedience to the people at the forefront of governance. Another representative of the Legalist school, Guan Zi[6], believed that "the prosperity of politics lies in conforming to the hearts of the people; the abolition of politics lies in rebelling against the hearts of the people." The primary task of governing a

country is to enrich the people. Only when production develops, the people become prosperous, and officials can despise wealth, can the rule of the country be stable.

Secondly, it emphasizes that clean governance lies in the use of talents. No matter which school of thought emphasizes that in order for a country to govern cleanly, it is necessary to pay attention to talented individuals in personnel selection. Guanzi believed that "hearing the virtues without raising them is dangerous; seeing the abilities without using them is dangerous. Han Feizi also pointed out that using virtue leads to governance, and not using virtue leads to death. To govern a country, it is necessary to choose suitable people to handle political affairs, which can determine the rise and fall of the country. It can be seen that Legalism has already linked the appointment of wise, capable, and enlightened individuals to the fate of the country.

Finally, the foundation of clean governance lies in the rule of law. Guanzi believed that "the law is the main road of the world." (Guanzi · Law) The state precedes its relatives, the law is more important than the people, and power is more precious than the nobility and salary. Therefore, it is not important to prioritize treasures over orders, not to follow the state after relatives, and not to bend the law for loving the people." (Guanzi · Law) In complying with the law, it advocates that the monarch, officials, and nobles follow the law, and that the monarch cannot be above the law. The center of Han Feizi's rule of law ideology is also to respect the public and abolish private interests. Emphasizing that once the law is enacted, both the common people and officials must abide by the rules and regulations, achieving the goal of "officials dare not bend the law, and officials dare not engage in private activities." ("Han Feizi · Eighth Treatise")[7] Achieving the goal of "orders must be implemented, prohibitions must be stopped." It can be seen that the positive elements in Legalism still have a positive and beneficial impact on today's anti-corruption construction.

Throughout history, it is impossible to fundamentally solve the problem of corruption solely through moral governance, harsh punishments, movements, coups, and even uprisings. The term "rule of law" first appeared in the book "Guanzi", and Shang Yang, Han Fei, and others developed and practiced this idea in a later period. By the Han Dynasty, the advocacy of the rulers' ideology of "deposing hundreds of schools of thought and respecting Confucianism alone" made the "rule of virtue" and "rule of etiquette" mainstream in China's feudal society for over two thousand years. Until modern times, combating corruption not only required building a solid ideological and moral defense line, but also taking the path of rule of law. This is an important experience and lesson summary of the anti-corruption process in China and other countries around the world. The exercise of power makes the emergence of corruption possible, and the fundamental aspect of anti-corruption work is to fully implement the rule of law in the establishment, exercise, supervision, and restriction of power, in order to prevent the emergence of corruption. Looking back at the history of the occurrence and development of corruption in China, the overall promotion of rule of law construction is relatively lagging behind the spread of corruption. Strengthening the legal construction pace of preventing and punishing corrupt behaviors is the fundamental requirement of anti-corruption and promoting integrity.

### 3. Conclusions

Due to the limitations of class and the instincts of class, it is impossible for historical thinkers or politicians to propose a concept of clean governance that truly meets the fundamental interests of the general public and a long-term mechanism for clean governance[8]. However, the ruler and the ruled are a pair of contradictory entities that are interconnected, interdependent, and fundamentally opposed to each other's interests. If rulers allow their instinctive desires to expand, pursue comfort and pleasure, and unchecked exploitation of the ruled, it will inevitably lead to the intensification of contradictions and even the overthrow of political power. Therefore, in order to maintain and continue their rule, rulers must restrain their selfish instincts and treat the people rationally. The idea that water can carry a boat and also capsize it has elevated the dialectical relationship between the monarch and the people to a rational level of understanding. From the legendary era of the Three Emperors and Five Emperors who shared joys and sorrows with the people, to the historical era of dynasties, the continuous expression of clean government ideas such as protecting and loving the people, and being clean and dedicated to the public has become an important and shining figure in ancient Chinese traditional culture.

In recent years, the corruption phenomenon that has emerged in various countries around the world has always been a concern for the public, and even caused a certain degree of anxiety. Corruption is indeed a serious and persistent disease for the country, society, and political parties, but it is by no means an incurable disease. Establishing a sound mechanism for power supervision and restraint has become a

fundamental strategy for building a defense line against corruption and change. Therefore, in order to prevent and control corruption, it is necessary to strengthen ideological and moral education, improve the rule of law, and strictly regulate the mechanism of power supervision and restriction. We must imprison power in the cage of the system, and truly form a punishment mechanism that does not dare to corrupt, a prevention mechanism that cannot corrupt, and a guarantee mechanism that is not easily corrupt.

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