
A Filipino Sense of the Political Thoughts of Mo Tzu, Hsun Tzu and Han Fei Tzu

Bernabe M. Mijares, Jr.
Jo Kariza Celeste D. Ebojo
Bohol Island State University

Abstract. This article provides theoretical-conceptual basis to make sense of identified Filipino political practices, both local and national. Three Chinese political thinkers are considered namely, Mo Tzu who pointed out that successful governance is achieved when the “worthy” are “honored” and the “capable” are “employed;” Hsun Tzu who emphasized that an enlightened King governs according to the regulation that “equality is based upon inequality,” which is modelled after Heaven and Earth; and Han Fei Tzu who advised that a ruler should “carefully and tightly grip” the handles of government which are reward and punishment. Given the preceding, the Filipino practice of nepotism is a violation of the law (national statute) but may not necessarily run counter Mo Tzu’s criterion of worthiness since one’s kin in position may likewise possess the needed qualification. Additionally, political dynasties, which are a common feature in Philippine local politics, may shun democratized participation but per se, does not shatter the hierarchy of the governing and the governed (heaven and earth). They may likewise indicate consensus among the governed which is a higher test for an ordered state. Finally, a President’s unorthodox way of reward and punishment could suit well within Han Fei Tzu’s advice to “carefully and tightly grip” the handles of the government. This analysis is far from exhaustive but could well be of use for small groups or classroom discussions. Detailed aspects of Filipino political practices may be explored for in-depth juxtaposition with the thoughts of the Chinese philosophers.

Keywords: Mo Tzu, Hsun Tzu, Han Fei Tzu, Filipino Nepotism, Filipino Political Dynasty

Introduction

This paper presents the basic political thoughts of three Chinese thinkers: Mo Tzu, Hsun Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu. They belong to different groups or schools of thought in Chinese thinking. Mo Tzu was a Mohist, Hsun Tzu was a Confucian scholar, and Han Fei Tzu was a Legalist. Generally, they differ in their views, but there are also points of connection among them as far as their political themes or thoughts are concerned. The review comes in short

summaries of the sections of their works (or works attributed to them) that are particularly devoted to politics and governance. This is far from exhaustive of the whole political thought or treatise of any particular thinker. Towards the end, the authors will analyze certain aspects of Philippine politics, transpiring at the local and national levels, to offer instances of the relevance of Chinese political thought to the present.

Mo Tzu: Summary of His Basic Political Thought

Honoring the Worthy (Part I, Section 8) (Watson, n.d.). Mo Tzu laments that while rulers and officials of nations of the current time aspire for their states to be rich, their populations numerous, and their administration well-ordered, they instead acquire the opposite. According to him, this is due to the failure to implement the principle on which successful governance is founded, which is to “honor the worthy and employ the capable” in their administration. He describes a government rich with worthy men as “characterized in weight and substance,” but that which is poor of their presence is an “administration of paltry affairs.”

Who, then are these worthy men? Mo Tzu qualifies that they are those who “practiced virtue, skilled in discourse and broad in learning.” They are those who come indeed because of their worth and not because of their material, familial, and social circumstances. Therefore, the worthy men may be rich or poor, descendants of rulers and officials or commoners, intimate to the ruler, or unknown from remote areas.

In the past, worthy men as subordinates offered knowledge of the arts of government. The sage kings, in turn, bestowed upon them material benefits. They were enriched, honored, respected, and praised. Since they were the righteous, they have to be obtained in plenty, and the benefits can usher their coming forward.

In particular, how did the sage kings honor the worthy men in their empire? Mo Tzu relates that they were “honored with titles, treated to generous stipends, entrusted with important matters, and empowered to see that their orders were carried out.” Accordingly, generous stipends are important since without them, people will not have confidence in the worthy, and if their orders are not carried out, then other subordinates will not “stand in awe of them.” The benefits were not given as a particular gift from the ruler but so that success in the affairs of the government was ensured.

Affording further length to the comparison, Mo Tzu narrates that at the time of the sage kings, “ranks were assigned according to virtue, duties allotted according to the office held, and rewards given according to the efforts expended; achievements were weighed and stipends distributed

accordingly.” Pounding more on honoring the worthy and, in essence, discouraging the practice of *torens title* in the affairs and administration of the government, Mo Tzu points out that “no official is assured of an exalted position for life, and no member of the common people is necessarily condemned to remain forever humble.”

Mo Tzu ends Section 8 of Part I with advice to obtain the services of the worthy men (which he termed in the concluding part of the section as the “noblemen”). Their services, he insured, will not thwart the plans and wear by care the body of the ruler. They will establish his (ruler or king) fame and bring his undertakings to a successful conclusion. Finally, they will make manifest his excellence and make sure that no evil will mar it. Thus, says Mo Tzu: “Honoring the worthy is the foundation of good government.”

Honoring the Worthy (Part II, Section 9) (Watson, n.d.). Mo Tzu opens up Section 9 with a seemingly self-evident statement. He said that there is order when the eminent and the wise rule over the stupid and humble. Otherwise, there is chaos. Moreover, since man’s universal natural proclivity is ordered, then the government should honor the worthy, as they are essentially those who can bring order. Moreover, Mo Tzu emphasizes that “the foundation of good government is to honor the worthy.” This pronouncement becomes more meaningful and frees itself from its tautological character as Mo Tzu later emphasizes the model of Heaven and Earth.

Advancing the worthy and employing the capable are the catchphrases of Mo Tzu’s good governance. When those deserving of promotion and rejection are accorded their due, people are encouraged and deterred by the sanctions. When the worthy are honored not based on material and social circumstances but purely on their knowledge, skills, and values, and the unworthy are rejected as they lack those that are characteristic of the worthy, “people are encouraged by the hope of reward” and deterred by the “fear of punishment.” Consequently, worthy men will increase, and unworthy men will decrease. This is “advancing the worthy.” When the worthy are thereupon entrusted with the administration of the state, this is, as Mo Tzu labels, “employing the capable.”

What comes after the above is Mo Tzu’s specific identification of the occupations in the government where worthy men should be assigned with the specific objectives they were to achieve for successful governance. These would include the administration of the state, the government bureaus, and the outlying districts. The primary task of ordering the state is the just administration of laws and punishment. The government bureau, on

the other hand, is well-managed when the treasury is full and the people are well-off, while outlying districts should be tended where seeds are sown, trees are planted, and vegetables and grains are gathered. In all of these, Mo Tzu prescribes that the worthy men assigned to function in the identified occupations shall leave their houses early for work and come home late to retire.

For the rulers, Mo Tzu has given them precautions that must be carefully watched out to ensure success in the government. These are: (1) if the titles and positions of the worthy men are not exalted enough, then the people will not respect such men; (2) if their stipends are not generous, then the people will not have confidence in them; and (3) if their orders are not enforced, then the people will not stand in awe of them.

It is interesting to note that, as Mo Tzu observed, it is in the grant of stipends that the present rulers are deficient in dealing with worthy men. With the meager stipends, the worthy men then felt that the rulers only used them as a means for their own ends, despite the honor titles. The stipends, therefore, that were given do not follow in proportion with the title.

When worthy men do not come to the ruler, their opposite, the unworthy, will be there. Mo Tzu describes them as “not loving or filial to their parents at home; not respectful and friendly to the people of their neighborhood. Their actions show no sense of propriety, their comings and goings no sense of restraint, and their relations with the opposite sex no sense of decorum.” The unworthy men cannot deliver success to the government because “even if he works day and night [he] will never be able to attend to his duties of post.”

Honoring the worthy as the foundation of the government is a principle not only asserted by Mo Tzu alone. This is the way of the sage kings.

When the ancient sage kings honor the worthy and employ the capable in the government, they pattern their actions on the ways of Heaven for “Heaven too shows no discrimination between rich and poor, eminent and humble, near and far, the closely and the distantly related. It promotes and honors the worthy and demotes and rejects the unworthy.”

Mo Tzu then speaks of the consequence of being a sage king and a wicked king. Sage kings were the eminent ones who strive to love all men universally, worked to benefit them and taught their subjects to honor Heaven and serve the spirits. “They were rewarded by Heaven and the spirits by setting them up as Sons of Heaven and causing them to act as fathers and mothers to the people. The people then praise them as sage kings even until today.” Wicked kings were those who possessed wealth and eminence and

still practiced evil. They were condemned by the people calling them wicked kings until today.

Mo Tzu concludes *section 9* by pointing out that virtue and righteousness are needed if one were to lead the feudal lords; if one were to become a king. For him, ruling and leading could not be accomplished through display of might and power since it will overthrow others and drive people towards death which is what they hate most.

Against Fatalism (Part I, Section 35) (Watson, n.d.). Mo Tzu points out that rulers and high officials of the present fail to get what they seek and achieve what they abhor not only because they have failed to implement the fundamental principle of governance. They also failed because the large number of the people is fatalists.

The advocates of fatalism say “If fate decrees that the state will be wealthy; it will be wealthy; if it decrees that it will be poor, it will be poor” (Sjöholm, 1967). In other words, things are because fate dictates it. Reason permits that it would not be excessive and uncalled for if one subject such a belief into a simple investigation. And since it comes in the form of a theory, Mo Tzu suggests that it should pass the three tests of its origin, validity and applicability.

A theory is judged in its origin by comparing it with the deeds of the sage kings of antiquity; it is judged in its validity by comparing it with the evidence of the eyes and ears of the people; and it is judged in its applicability by observing whether, when it is put into practice in the administration, it brings benefit to the state and the people.

Mo Tzu argues that when one looks back into the past, it could be observed that while there was chaos, there was also order in the government. He seems to demonstrate herein that there was no identifiable pattern of governance quality that may be fated to transpire. Later on, he will argue that the very chaos and order in those past governments were not caused by fate but by the change in the way rulers govern their subjects. Moreover, Mo Tzu laments that among the “statues,” “the codes of punishment” and the “declarations,” no matter how one would search, there is never any evidence to support the theories of the fatalists.

As regard its validity, fatalism does not harmonize with what people aspire. It replaces righteousness with fate and creates worry for the people which eventually would destroy the men of the world. Moreover, righteous men who were appointed to authority were rewarded because of their worthy deeds and not because they are fated to be rewarded. This is evidenced by the life of the sages. In the same way that wicked men were punished

because of their wicked deeds. The basis of reward and punishment was not fate but the statues and laws issued and published by the ancient sage kings in order to encourage good and prevent evil. Fatalism is the way of evil men. They have succumbed to their weakness and have not been diligent to pursue their task and made fate as an excuse.

Finally, fatalism is flawed in terms of applicability. Accepting it would mean that those above would not attend to the affairs of state and those below would not pursue their tasks (Beck, n.d.). Therefore, it does not bring benefit to “Heaven above, no benefit to the spirits in the middle realm, and no benefit to mankind below.”

Mo Tzu then concludes that those who insist upon holding fatalism are the source of pernicious doctrines and this is the way of evil men. Boldly, he states that the doctrine of the fatalists “brings great harm to the world.”

Hsun Tzu: Summary of his Basic Political Thought

The Regulations of a King (Section 9) (Watson, n.d.). Not exclusively different from other Chinese thinkers, Hsun Tzu, in presenting his political thoughts, provided principles and even specific proscriptions on the characteristics of a state, where and to what should it be founded and how should it be managed.

In Section 9 on *The Regulations of a King*, Hsun Tzu prescribes how a ruler should govern the different types or classes of individuals. For those who are worthy, they deserved to be promoted without even waiting for their turn; but those who are inferior and incompetent should be dismissed outright, without hesitation. Those who are incorrigibly evil should be punished without trying to reform them and those who have average capacity should be taught what is right without forcing them into goodness. There are also men with perverse words and theories who, accordingly, should be taught what is right. If they settle down to their work, they become subjects; if not, they should be cast out. Moreover, Hsun Tzu also prescribes that the dumb, deaf, crippled, missing an arm or leg and dwarfed should be provided and taken care of. And finally, those who work against the good of the time should be condemned to death without mercy.

Since much is expected from those who shall occupy the high positions in the government, they should possess the necessary characteristics that would enable them to function as they are expected. To ensure this, standards have to be met which, as Hsun Tzu enumerates, are “acquisition of learning, upright in conduct and adherence to ritual principles.” These are not prejudiced by the social circumstances of any

person which implies that one can be in a high position regardless of whether he is a descendant of kings or dukes or a commoner.

In listening to proposals in the government, Hsun Tzu guides that fair-mindedness is the balance to be used to weigh them and upright harmoniousness is the line by which to measure them. Fair-mindedness is achieved by not practicing favoritism or having partisan feeling and without constant principles. Upright harmoniousness is achieved when one uses the law, or in its absence, invokes precedence and analogy.

In hearing proposals in the government then, the good is distinguish from the bad by the law as the measure. With it, one could neither be too stern and severe nor too sympathetic and understanding. And such could only be achieved by men in office who have an over-all understanding of their duties. Only a gentleman, as Hsun Tzu calls him, is capable of such a government.

Hsun Tzu then presents his concept of equality which he encapsulates in the statement “equality is based upon inequality.” It is apparent that this is not comparable to the contemporary understanding of equality. Hsun Tzu says that: “with equal ranks, there would be no enough goods to go around; where there is equal distribution of power, there will be lack of unity; and where there is equality among the masses, it will be impossible to employ them” (The History of Ancient Chinese Economic Thought, n.d). Thus, for him, equality in ranks and power leads to disorder.

Equality as inequality is modeled after Heaven and Earth. Hsun Tzu says that “the very existence of Heaven and Earth exemplifies the principle of higher and lower” and therefore negating equality as a leveling. Finally, Hsun Tzu believes that only an enlightened king governs according to such a regulation.

While Hsun Tzu obviously favors the existence of rank as the necessary feature of equality, he does not, as such, favor those who are in the higher ranks. His treatise on good governance in fact emphasizes the satisfaction of the common people. He says that “if the common people are frightened of the government, then the gentleman cannot occupy his post in safety.” Further, Hsun Tzu opines that “the ruler is the boat and the common people are the water. It is the water that bears the boat up, and the water that capsizes it.” Thereupon, the ruler has the obligations to (1) govern fairly and love the people, (2) honor ritual and treat men of breeding with respect, and (3) promote the worthy and employ men of ability. As these are realized, the gentleman, accordingly, achieves safety, glory, fame and merit.

Comparing the king – a true leader of the people – to other government leaders, Hsun Tzu says that “a king enriches his people, a

dictator enriches his soldiers, a state that is barely managing to survive enriches its high officers and a doomed state enriches only its coffers and stuffs its storehouses.” Lastly, Hsun Tzu believes that too much attention to tax collection is not the path of the enlightened ruler.

Hsun Tzu likewise speaks of the use of force. He believes that he who uses force to conquer other states not only inflict injury to the people of the conquered but also to his own. In both sides, he does not win their sympathy and affection. “One who truly understands how to use force does not rely upon force,” Hsu Tzu preaches. The explanation he provides for this refers to a ruler who builds up his own might so that it cannot be weakened by others and who creates a fund of good will so that it cannot be reduced to insignificance by feudal lords. He therefore builds force not to wage an offensive with others but to strengthen his foundation and defenses. Such a ruler will, “if he happens to live in a time where there is no true king or dictator in the world,” always be victorious.

From the preceding, Hsun Tzu moves on to expound the dynamics of the relations between Heaven and Earth. He explains that Heaven and Earth are the beginning of life and their unity is the basis of all other relations, thus, higher (Heaven) – lower (Earth) is the model for ruler-subject, father-son, elder-younger, etc. One could observe that this unity is essentially characterized by rank or hierarchy and ritual principles are based on its recognition (rank or hierarchy) which when applied or observed in all other relations will establish order. The gentleman is the one who recognizes this unity and establishes ritual principles. Therefore, it is he who brings order to Heaven and Earth. Hsun Tzu says that he (the gentleman) “acts on, practices, guards and loves, more than anything else, the principle.” Further, he says that the gentleman “forms a triad with Heaven and Earth” and that “he is the controller of all things, the father and mother of the people.”

Are humans capable of following the ritual principles? Is it of their nature that they are able to emulate the hierarchy of Heaven and Earth and thereby establish order among themselves? While order could be established through the guardianship and implementation of the gentleman, it is also inherent upon men to follow the natural order of things. Hsun Tzu says that “man is the noblest being on earth because he possesses energy, life, intelligence, and, in addition, a sense of duty.” Man establishes a society and in it, he sets up hierarchy. Such setting up is not an exercise in vain. Hierarchy is there precisely because man has the ability to perform his duty, that is, to carry out functions and obligations inherent upon any level of the hierarchy. With his sense of duty, hierarchical divisions would lead to harmony, unity, strength and power “that will conquer the world.” Hsun Tzu

says that a society without hierarchical division will result into “quarreling, to chaos, to fragmentation which makes men weak to conquer other beings.” Acting on one’s sense of duty is in fact to follow the ritual principles which, according to Hsun Tzu, should not be neglected even for a moment. Thus, “he who serves his parents is called filial; he who serves his elderly brother is called brotherly; he who serves his superior is called obedient; and he who employs his inferiors is called a ruler.”

It is the gentleman who is the origin of ritual principles. And in the actual management, administration, and governance, it is the king who concretely immerses his hands in actual and real conditions. It is therefore the king who could be significantly instrumental in ensuring that the ritual principles are observed. By then, the gentleman is in the king, the sage king. He is one who is “good at organizing men in society.”

An organized society is an ordered society. Things therein are in their proper places and government commands are issued at the proper time; people are united and good men offer their services.

The measure of a sage king then is this: “He looks up to examine heaven, looks down to direct the work of the earth, completes all that is necessary between heaven and earth, and applies his actions to all things.” A sage king thus is he whose every move is founded on unity.

Hsun Tzu then moves on to specify the different officials that would comprise the government. They are the Master of Tiles, Minister of the Interior, Minister of War, Chief Director of Music, Minister of Works, Administrator of the Fields, Director of Resources, Director of Communities, Director of Artisans, Hunchback Shamanesses and Crippled Shamans, Director of Markets, Minister of Justice, Prime Minister, High officials and finally, the Heavenly King. The heavenly king, being the one who leads all should have “weight in authority, strong in military might, and fair in reputation” as his attributes.

With the officials identified, Hsun Tzu also accorded the Prime Minister and the Heavenly King the weight of blame for major failures. He says that “disorder in the affairs of the government is to be blamed to the prime minister.” And of the customs of the country are faulty, it is “due to the error of the high officials.” Finally, “if the world is not unified and the feudal lords are rebellious, then the heavenly king is not the right man for the job.”

In assisting other states that are in danger of being wiped out, the state concerned should remain free and flourishing and act from the sincerity of one’s innermost heart, Hsun Tzu cautions. This, he emphasizes, is the way to win merit and fame.