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Governance Principles

Tǒngzhì yuánzé 统治原则

Throughout its history, China has been ruled according to one (or a combination) of three different principles of governance. The same basic precepts that have applied for thousands of years are still active today.

The concept of *governance* includes a wide range of subjects relating to how nations have exercised authority and enforced social and political order. In fact, humans have had governance long before there were nations in the modern sense. For traditional Chinese rulers over the centuries, the principles of the Mandate of Heaven reflected the moral order of the universe and charged authority at all levels with the welfare of subordinates. China has experienced only a limited range of governmental types in its long history, all of them centralized, and each one involving one or more of three main guiding principles of governance: *lizhi* 礼治 (rites and rituals), *fazhi* 法治 (laws), and *renzhi* 人治 (rulers).

Tianming 天命: The Mandate of Heaven

Over many centuries, traditional Chinese rulers sought to acquire a source of legitimacy in what was traditionally referred to as the "Mandate of Heaven," or Tianming. Most probably, the concept first emerged to serve the political needs of Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE) rulers who, by military conquest, ended the Shang dynasty in the eleventh century BCE. As usurpers, the Zhou needed a means to legitimize their seizure of power, which would immediately become justified if they could claim that their predecessors had failed to respect the Mandate of Tian 天命. Though *Tian* is commonly translated as *Heaven* or *the heavens,* both of these English words typically carry a misleading evocation of a Western-style Creator-God who resides in heavenly realms; hence the term is not subject to translation here in order to mark the difference. In general, *Tian* is most appropriately conceived as a name for the higher powers operating within a totality composed of heavens above and earth below.

By the time of Confucius (sixth century BCE), Tianming began to be applied to authorities at all levels, indicating an obligation to see to the welfare of their subordinates. Over time, Tian, though impersonal, came to be seen as potentially concerned for the welfare of human beings. The key test was prosperity, implying that rulers needed to ensure the material welfare of their people. If a ruler ceased to rule justly or wisely in these terms and began to rule only with his own self-interest at heart, then he could be seen as having lost the Mandate of Tian. In that case, an attempt at overthrowing the ruler might be justified. Rebellion was always a tricky proposition, however, because rebels could only justify the legitimacy of their revolt when and if the rebellion ended in their favor.

The Mandate of Tian thus came to represent the moral order of the universe. When the proper order was respected, the physical world ran smoothly and the human world prospered. When that order was not respected, anomalous and/or destructive events, such as earthquakes, floods, eclipses, or even epidemics, took place in the normal order

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of the universe. Solar eclipses were particularly difficult to forecast, but predicting them accurately was a way of assuring the populace that the central authority was indeed in touch with the powers represented by Tian, and thus worthy of their allegiance. Making accurate predictions became so important that emperors sought out the finest astronomers and mathematicians they could find, even if they were not always Chinese. When the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (Li Madou, 利玛窦, 1552–1610) arrived in China late in the Ming dynasty 1368–1644), he was welcomed because he offered calculations that improved on those given by the mathematicians from India who had previously staffed this imperial service.

Lizhi, *Fazhi*, and *Renzhi*

A basic distinction in Chinese political thinking as to the nature of social-political order and the best means of achieving it is marked by the distinction between *li* 礼, conventionally translated as *rites* or *rituals,* and *fa* 法, conventionally translated as *law* or *regulations.*

Lizhi 礼治, traditionally associated with Confucianists 儒家, refers to political order based on reference to the *li* (or rites, that is, traditional customs and norms). This form of governance tends to be localized and situation-based.

In contrast, *fazhi* 法治, traditionally associated with Legalists 法家, refers to order attained primarily through reliance on publicly codified rules backed by the power of the state. In contrast to the Confucianists, who taught that social order would come from knowing one's proper place in life, the Legalists promoted strong (often ruthless) centralized authority.

The relative merits of these two approaches—*lizhi* and *fazhi*—to social and political order have long been debated in the Chinese tradition. Basic differences in these positions still persist in debates about governance today.

First, advocates of *lizhi* tend to favor less formal means of maintaining order than advocates of *fazhi.* The former believe that informal methods foster more nuanced and situation-specific justice; the latter believe such methods give excessive discretionary authority to those in power and thus foster corruption and other abuses.

Second, *fa* (in the sense of laws) refers to formal rules of greater general applicability than *li,* which constitute the web of informal rules that were traditionally understood as attached to hereditary elites. *Fazhi,* therefore, is an externally imposed order that requires compliance more than participation, whereas *lizhi* emphasizes individual commitment and self-discipline as a way of maintaining social order.

Third, advocates of *lizhi* tend to be more optimistic about human nature and the possibility of achieving a harmonious social order in which each person is able to find a place and play an appropriate role. They tend to see civility, social order, and humanity as attainable goals. In contrast, many advocates of *fazhi* take a dimmer view of human nature. They see humans as so self-interested that, left to their own devices, the strong will exploit the weak. Impartial rules are necessary to limit the harm that one person can do to another. Thus, according to *fazhi,* law should serve to ensure minimal protection to all by systematically punishing transgressors.

Overall, there has been no stable dominance in China of either *lizhi* or *fazhi,* partly due to what (in modern perspective) can be seen as the inescapable importance of a third element: the attitudes and judgments of the ruler (*renzhi* 人治). Different supreme authorities exercised a decisive influence on the relative importance given to one or the other value at any particular historical moment.

When modern leaders seek stability above all, they may well evoke both morality (*lizhi*) and legality (*fazhi,* in its modern rule-of-law sense). During the 1990s, for example, President Jiang Zemin reiterated from time to time the principle that the People's Republic of China should be governed with morality (*yi de zhi guo* 以德治国) in addition to laws (*yi fa zhi guo* 以依法治国). Thus today's Chinese authorities rely on both *lizhi* and *fazhi* depending on circumstances: They encourage good behavior (in relation to implementing current policies) by positive encouragement, but hold in reserve strong threats of punishment for anyone who proves recalcitrant.

While this assertion applies mainly to the strong centralized government, recently there have been moves towards a more popular basis for local government. Thus in many regions, village councils now have members elected by popular vote. Such procedures, however, do not imply a widespread adoption of Western-style principles of democracy. Over much of last thousand years, while China was ruled by authoritarian emperors, villages chose their own local leaders, often by election. Hence, in China,

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such practices have proved to be fully compatible with highly centralized power structures. In addition, locally elected officials typically have less clout than the village Party secretary, who is appointed by the Party, as are the officials of townships and counties, the next higher levels of administration. Since their support is needed for any local complaints to be taken seriously, the practical effects of these elections are tightly circumscribed.

Chinese Political Thinking

Chinese political thinking has always been hierarchical and organized around a strong central authority. Chinese leaders are normally seen as being able to determine what is in the best interests of society and its members. Indeed, much of their authority is based on their claim to superior ethical insight and political wisdom, that is, their knowledge of the best way to govern under current conditions.

In accordance with Confucian teaching that the harmonious family is the best metaphor for good governance, the image of the father traditionally dominates political rhetoric in China, though the specifics of the image vary according to the writer's convictions. The Confucian (*lizhi*) father-ruler is kind, compassionate, and more a facilitator of order than an imposer of order. The Legalist father-ruler (*fazhi*) is a tough disciplinarian who well understands that—in Western idiom—"to spare the rod is to spoil the child" 孩子不打不成器. Nevertheless, such a stern father, knowing what is best, takes care of his children.

As part of its holistic worldview, China has long assumed that the interests of the state and the individual can be brought into harmony. If one makes this assumption,

Chinese officials at a seminar of the China Council for Promotion of International Trade.
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Voters attend the municipal elections in Shanghai. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

there seems no need to evoke rights to protect the individual against the state. The situation is very different from that in the modern West, where individual human rights are often evoked as the only way to protect individuals from the power of the state.

Given these differences in orientation within China itself, it seems safe to predict that disagreements about governance will continue. China has always had a strong central government, and there is no visible reason to believe that will change. But in the case of how that central government governs—whether by *lizhi* or *fazhi* or some combination of both—there is no final word on such debates. No system of governance is perfect because no one has yet achieved the ideal means for realizing and maintaining social order.

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Further Reading

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