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Paternalistic Gratitude: The Theory and Politics of Confucian Political Obligation

Shu-Shan Lee[1]

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Abstract

While researchers have offered remonstration-oriented, reciprocal, voluntary, and gratitude-based accounts of political obligation in classical Confucianism, I argue that these interpretations are either in conflict with the textual evidence or merely scratch the surface of Confucius' theory of political obligation without fully elaborating its essence. Instead, I demonstrate that the theory of political obligation in Confucianism is a specific argument from paternalistic gratitude in which the people's political obligation is analogically compared to children's grateful duty to their parents. Moreover, I use the Confucian theory of paternalistic gratitude to critically examine China's recent politics of political obligation in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan 四川 earthquake. Although the Confucian-sounding references, such as kindness and the parent-state analogy, figure into the CPC's Gratitude Education campaign (*ganen jiaoyu* 感恩教育), the Party's politics of political obligation does not meet the Confucian normative standard. Specifically, in the Confucian theory of paternalistic gratitude, the people will be grateful to a benevolent ruler without this feeling being demanded by the state. However, in the Gratitude Education campaign, the Party self-righteously exacted the earthquake survivors' gratitude. Local dissidents were subject to the stigmatization of "ungratefulness" and faced political violence as a consequence. The case of the Gratitude Education campaign serves as another example of the CPC's political use of Confucianism for its non-Confucian goals.

Keywords Benign vs. coercive paternalism · Confucianism · Gratitude Education campaign · Paternalistic gratitude · Political obligation

✉ Shu-Shan Lee
shushanlee@gmail.com

[1] Department of Social Sciences, Hampton University, 100 E Queen St, Hampton, VA 23669, USA

1 Introduction

A theory of political obligation answers the question of why people should obey the state, and political obligation is one of the most enduring subjects in the history of Western political thought. For instance, Plato addresses it in the *Crito* and suggests that the moral principles of consent and gratitude may justify Socrates's obedience to Athens (Plato 1997). But far from being a problem for ancient philosophy, the question of political obligation is still a topic of debate in the West. Different answers have been proposed, refined, and roughly split into the theories of consent, gratitude, association, fairness, and natural duty.[1] One thing is clear: the continuous debate echoes Isaiah Berlin's comment that political obligation "is perhaps the most fundamental of all political questions" (Berlin 1999: 148).

Likewise, the scholarly discussion of Confucian political obligation is also extensive. One of the most well-known views of Confucian political obligation is that it demands people's unconditional obedience. For centuries, scholars have adopted this idea to explain imperial China's alleged despotism (Montesquieu 1989), its retarded social evolution (Spencer 1972), and its backward economy (Weber 1968). In the past few decades, however, researchers have begun to challenge this long-held idea about Confucian submissiveness. Some argue that a Confucian theory of political remonstrance allows criticism of unjust authority. Some maintain that political obligation in Confucianism is reciprocal, in that the people's compliance is provided in exchange for the ruler's benevolent governance. Some point out that Confucianism endorses the idea that genuine authority is based on people's voluntary obedience. Still others suggest that Confucian political obligation is not absolute; rather, it is conditioned on gratitude.

This variety speaks to the complexity of the issue, complexity that I explore here with an aim to clarify. I agree that Confucianism does not support people's absolute obedience. However, I maintain that current accounts are either incompatible with the classics or merely scratch the surface of Confucian political obligation without fully elaborating its essence. These problems suggest that a theoretical understanding of political obligation in Confucianism has not yet been adequately articulated. One of the goals of this article is thus to bring the theory of Confucian political obligation to light.

Another goal of this article is to engage with politics in contemporary China. Recently, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has begun to appropriate certain Confucian concepts to justify its demands for Chinese citizens' obedience. Clarifying the theory of Confucian political obligation will also help us examine to what extent the Party follows the criteria established by the Confucian normative standard in its politics of political obligation.

Before my discussion begins, it should be noted that in the search for the theory of Confucian political obligation, I will limit myself to early Confucianism, particularly the *Analects*, a collection of the sayings of Confucius (c. 551–479 BCE).

[1] For a brief account of the development of these theories of political obligation in the Western literature, please see Klosko 2011.

Despite his self-acknowledgment of the ancient source of his teaching (*Analects* 3.14),[2] Confucius plays the key role in developing the basic principles of this source into a system of philosophy. In my study, therefore, the *Analects* of Confucius is treated as the primary text through which we understand the original premises of the Confucian theory of political obligation.

Moreover, I consult the books of *Mencius* and *Xunzi* 荀子 to strengthen my interpretation of the *Analects*. After the death of Confucius, Mencius (c. 385–312 BCE) and Xunzi (c. 310–219 BCE) represent the two major branches of the tradition of early Confucianism. Both regard themselves as true followers of Confucius and attempt to offer the faithful elaboration on his teaching. Therefore, when I have doubt about my interpretation of the *Analects*, I will turn to the *Mencius* and *Xunzi* for clarification. Moreover, the process of cross-reference is used to triangulate the theory of political obligation in early Confucianism. If the three Confucian masters all agree on a specific theory, it suggests that we might successfully answer the question at hand.

My discussion below follows in three parts. Section 2 presents the limitations of the current literature on Confucian political obligation. In Section 3, I uncover the Confucian theory of political obligation, demonstrating that it is an argument from *paternalistic gratitude*. Finally, in Section 4 I discuss the Gratitude Education campaign in the wake of the Sichuan 四川 earthquake and compare this empirical case with the theory of Confucian political obligation.

2 Four Interpretations of Confucian Political Obligations

I have identified four interpretations of Confucian political obligation in the literature: the arguments from remonstrance, reciprocity, voluntary obedience, and gratitude. The first interpretation relies on the Confucian concept of political remonstrance (*jian* 諫) to make space for critical disobedience in this tradition. In the *Analects*, surely, Confucius encourages ministers to challenge their ruler's mistakes. For example, when a student asks how to serve the ruler, Confucius replies, "Let there be no duplicity when taking a stand against him" (*Analects* 14.22).[3] Based on passages in which Confucius justifies political remonstration, Amartya Sen thus argues that "Confucius himself did not recommend blind allegiance" (Sen 1999: 14).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, in the *Analects*, political remonstrance does not apply to the commoners. Indeed, Confucius casts doubt on the political ability of the masses. For instance, he argues that "the common people can be induced to travel along the Way, but they cannot understand it" (*Analects* 8.9). To Confucius, good governance is always an application of the Way.[4] Because the

[2] I rely upon the translation of Ames and Rosemont 1998.

[3] For Confucius' teaching on political remonstrance, also see *Analects* 13.15, 16.1, 18.1, and 19.10.

[4] *Way* is the summary term of the Confucian normative principles regarding governance, social interactions, and ritual practice.

commoners cannot grasp it, they are not entitled to policy deliberation, let alone political remonstrance. As Confucius notes, "When the Way prevailed in the world, the common people did not debate affairs of the state" (*Analects* 16.2). Evidently, Confucius does not allow the commoners' political critique. Exclusively based on the evidence from the elite's remonstrance in the *Analects*, supporters of this approach, on the one hand, are unable to help us answer the question of why *the commoners* should obey the state according to the *Analects*. On the other, they cannot dispel the suspicion that Confucius may justify the elite's critical obedience but still expect absolute submission from ordinary people.

The second interpretation uses the idea of reciprocity to challenge the notion of Confucian submissiveness. For example, Xinzhong Yao claims, "Confucius seldom emphasized the one-way loyalty of commoners or ministers to their ruler. Rather, he insisted that the relationship must be reciprocal" (Yao 2000: 35). Yao leads us to D. C. Lau's translation of *Analects* 3.19 to support this observation, wherein we find the recommended reciprocity: "The ruler should employ the services of his subjects (*chen* 臣) in accordance with the rites. A subject (*chen*臣) should serve his ruler by doing his best" (Lau 1979). Similarly, Gungwu Wang argues that the Confucian ruler-subject relationship is grounded on "reciprocity which depended on both performing their duties" (G. Wang 1991: 171). Wang's evidence is James Legge's translation of *Analects* 12.11, "When the ruler is the ruler and the subject (*chen* 臣) is the subject (*chen* 臣) … there is government" (Legge 1971). The passage indicates that the subject's loyalty is conditioned on whether the leader meets his ruling duty.

These quotes seem to indicate a sense of ruler-subject reciprocity; some might suggest that this translation is disputable. They may say that the English term "subject" in the above two passages is translated from the Chinese character *chen* 臣 and that the appropriate translation of *chen* is "minister." They might thus continue that if we adopt the version in which *chen* is translated as "minister," what Wang and Yao interpret as ruler-subject reciprocity becomes the reciprocal duty between a ruler and his ministers. Consequently, they may conclude that the two authors have mistaken the officials' duty to their ruler for a theory of political obligation, which concerns instead why the *common people* should obey the state.

Even if Yao and Wang's evidence is disputable, however, it seems to be correct to say that political obligation in the *Analects* is reciprocal. For instance, Confucius argues, "If their superiors cherished appropriate conduct, none among the common people would dare be disobedient" (*Analects* 13.4). He also believes that a ruler will win the obedience of the people, if he and his government show "tolerance," "trustworthiness," "diligence," and "impartiality" toward them (*Analects* 20.1). Therefore, it is safe to say that a Confucian commoner's obedience is a reciprocal return to the ruler's appropriate conduct. Confucian political obligation does not demand unconditional obedience.

Nevertheless, the argument from reciprocity does not fully explain how Confucius might justify political obligation. As George Klosko notes, "Reciprocity is … a family of moral requirements … The principles underlying different requirements … are … consent, gratitude, fairness—and perhaps others" (Klosko 2005: 149). For instance, when the people in John Locke's social contract agree to obey the government in exchange for the protection of their rights, undergirding this reciprocity

is the principle of *consent* (Locke 2003). Alternatively, John Rawls maintains that, if one benefits from fellow citizens' cooperation, such as through tax-paid public infrastructure, one "is bound by a duty of fair play to do [one's] part and not to take advantage of the free benefit by not cooperating" (Rawls 1964: 10). In other words, Rawls's theory of political obligation is also a reciprocal obligation. However, unlike Locke, his reciprocal obligation is based on the principle of *fairness* to contribute to taxation and other public goods. To repeat, "Reciprocity is … a family of moral requirements" (Klosko 2005: 149), and thus to describe Confucian political obligation as reciprocal is not wrong but rather theoretically imprecise. To bring the theory of Confucian political obligation to light, we must follow the lead of Yao and Wang, but ask further what kind of reciprocity Confucius entertains.

Another challenge to the notion of absolute obedience claims that Confucian political obligation is grounded in the commoners' voluntary obedience. Two passages are frequently cited in support of this position. One is *Analects* 13.4, "If their superiors cherished appropriate conduct, none among the common people would dare be disobedient." The other is *Analects* 2.19, where Confucius argues that the ruler should "raise up the straight [ministers] and place them over the crooked [ministers]" to gain the commoners' allegiance. Both passages clearly indicate that, for Confucius, people will obey if the ruler delivers good governance. Based on the evidence, Tan Sor-hoon thus argues that in the *Analects* "[t]rue authority … brings voluntary compliance" (Tan 2010: 142), and Joseph Chan also asserts that, for Confucius, "true authority is based on the voluntary … acceptance of the people" (Chan 2014: 38).

However, the idea of voluntary obedience is still not theoretically precise enough to help us identify the underlying principle of Confucian political obligation. Indeed, voluntary obedience is very much a paraphrase of reciprocity. Again, in Locke's consent model, the people *voluntarily* obey the state because it governs according to the terms of a social contract, providing a benefit they cannot provide themselves. Likewise, in Rawls's principle of fairness, the people *voluntarily* obey the laws because it enforces sociopolitical cooperation and ensures the delivery of public goods that would otherwise go undelivered. Gratitude-driven political obligation is also a theory of voluntary obedience. In this model, we *voluntarily* obey because we are grateful for the benefits received from the state, such as the public education we had as children. All the reciprocal obligations mentioned here count as voluntary obedience, but they are grounded in different principles. In other words, like the argument from reciprocity, the idea of voluntary obedience also underspecifies the principles of political obligation in the *Analects*. To pinpoint Confucius' answer to the question of why people should obey the state, we must further examine the foundations of his account of voluntary obedience. Otherwise, we merely scratch the surface of his theory of political obligation.

Overall, I agree that the supporters of reciprocity and voluntary obedience have made a strong case against the notion of Confucian submissiveness. Both approaches, despite their important contributions, however, fall short of identifying the essential principle of Confucian political obligation.

Fortunately, the fourth interpretation, Henry Rosemont Jr. and Roger T. Ames's gratitude argument, is an attempt to uncover the principle underlying

Confucian political obligation. Rosemont and Ames suggest that to understand Confucian political obligation, we cannot see it from the viewpoint of the rights-bearing individual. According to them, the rights-bearing individual is the dominant understanding in the Western tradition, meaning that the individual appreciates himself as free and autonomous. His primary concern is his self-interest, and, in his pursuit of that, he bears basic rights as his self-defense against others' intervention. "If we are indeed free, rational and autonomous," Rosemont asks, "why should we want to surrender our freedom to a state?" (Rosemont 2016: 60). Accordingly, consent is the key for rights-bearing individuals to acknowledge their political obligation.

However, Confucian individuals are not rights-bearers; rather, they are role-bearing persons. Rosemont and Ames argue that when Confucius asserts "the ruler is the ruler and the subject is the subject" in *Analects* 12.11, he is not talking about two parties who consent to their relations. Instead, Confucius is articulating the relationship between role-bearing persons who are born into their sociopolitical roles without choice. The lack of choice and consent, however, does not make the relations oppressive. The interaction between Confucian role-bearing persons can be reciprocal and mutually beneficial if we follow Confucius' teaching to transform it into a relationship "between *benefactors* and *beneficiaries*" (Rosemont and Ames 2016: 80).

The Confucian transformation begins in the family. Briefly, the role of a child is primarily to be a beneficiary in the family. Confucius will blame a child if he serves his benefactor—his parent—with reluctance. For example, when one of his students asks about children's reverence to their parents, Confucius replies, "What is difficult is to show proper countenance. As for the young contributing their energies when there is work to be done, and deferring to their elders when there are wine and food to be had—how can merely doing this be considered being filial?" (*Analects* 2.8). According to Rosemont and Ames, Confucius' message here is that "[i]f we are … raised … in a loving home, we should come to realize fairly early in life what our parents did for us …. And these realizations should give rise to a sense of joy when having the opportunity to care for them" (Rosemont 2016: 99–100). Put differently, Confucius' requirement of proper countenance indicates that children's reciprocal behaviors are not merely a formality. Rather, the joyful response reveals that "[o]ur family reverence is grounded in gratitude" (Rosemont and Ames 2009: 55–56). It should be a pleasure for a grateful son or daughter to be able to care for his or her parents.

Instead of rights-bearing consent, gratitude is thus the key for a Confucian role-bearer to acknowledge his filial obligation. In general, he should obey his parents' instructions. However, obedience is not the only component in Confucian filial obligation. Confucius also says, "In serving your father and mother, remonstrate with them gently" (*Analects* 4.18). Indeed, children's grateful obedience and remonstrance is crucial to ensure that a Confucian family is beneficial to all its members. As Rosemont and Ames explain, "In Confucian terms, the roles are mutually entailing: The parents are responsible for our care and well-being as benefactors, and we the beneficiary children have the obligation to be obedient [and to remonstrate] so

that the parents can properly meet their obligations" (Rosemont and Ames 2009: 56–57). When both parties reciprocally discharge their duties, the family prospers.

Most importantly, Rosemont and Ames argue that the Confucian child's filial gratitude is also politically applicable. As Confucius says: "It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of filial … responsibility to have a taste for defying authority" (*Analects* 1.2). To Rosemont and Ames, Confucius' teaching here is the applicability of children's grateful obligation to politics. As Ames elaborates, "Family roles as a strategy for getting the most out of relations are … an inspiration for order more broadly construed …. We might say that Confucianism is nothing more than a sustained attempt 'to family' the lived human experience" (Ames 2011: 98).

Certainly, in Confucius' world, the ruler and the commoners are born into their respective roles. Although the role-bearing commoners do not consent to their political relations, they have their family experience to inspire their political obligation. If through filial cultivation they have understood that gratitude is an adequate response to their parents, they should also realize their gratefulness to their political benefactor, their ruler. Put simply, to Rosemont and Ames, Confucian political obligation is gratitude-based.

As mentioned above, the arguments from reciprocity and voluntary obedience stop short of identifying the underlying principle of Confucian political obligation. Rosemont and Ames's gratitude-based interpretation thus represents an important effort to help us specify Confucius' teaching. Nevertheless, there are problems with their account. First, the implication of Rosemont and Ames's gratitude account is not fully compatible with the *Analects*. As they maintain, children's gratefulness is demonstrated in their obedience as well as in their remonstrance. It is through the combination of these two that Confucian children can assist their parents in performing their duty well. Now, Rosemont and Ames assert that children's grateful obedience and remonstrance are politically applicable. Presumably, in terms of political obligation, the Confucian commoners should also obey and remonstrate so that the ruler can properly meet his governing duty. This is the story of political obligation that Rosemont and Ames's argument implies. However, it is not the story of political obligation that Confucius can be said to endorse wholeheartedly. Simply put, Confucius does not allow the commoners to remonstrate with their ruler because of his doubts about their political ability.

Second, and most importantly, Rosemont and Ames talk about the applicability of the family to politics without demonstrating how this holds true with sufficient textual proof. In their interpretation, Rosemont and Ames only engage with one of Confucius' sayings that is relevant to gratitude-based political obligation. Specifically, Ames cites a passage from the *Analects* in which Confucius vaguely talks about the interaction between the ruling class and the commoners: "The excellence (*de* 德) of the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) is the wind, while that of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend" (*Analects* 12.19). According to Ames, the excellence of the exemplary person should be read as the ruler's "beneficence" to the people, and the excellence of the petty person should be interpreted as "the … 'gratitude' of a people expressed in response to the largess of a worthy ruler" (Ames 2011: 209).

However, Ames's evidence is disputable. Instead of indicating the exchange between beneficence and gratitude, *Analects* 12.19 has been understood by many as suggesting the interaction between the ruler's moral example and the commoners' moral mimicry. As one commentator explains, Confucius' point here is that "the common people always look up to their betters and if those in position of authority set an example this will be imitated" (Lau 1979: 33).[5] In contrast to this common understanding, Ames's gratitude-based interpretation appears to be peculiar. In short, Rosemont and Ames should offer additional evidence to explain why *Analects* 12.19 can be interpreted as a case of gratitude-based political obligation.

As is clear, scholars have drawn new evidence from the *Analects* to reject the notion that Confucianism demands people's absolute obedience. While I believe that their challenges are worthwhile, I nevertheless find that they have not yet reconstructed the theory of Confucian political obligation with enough evidence and theoretical precision. This limitation requires us to further engage with the *Analects* and locate Confucius' answer to the question of why people should obey the state.

3 The Theory of Confucian Political Obligation

I begin the search for Confucian political obligation with a chapter in the *Analects*. This passage records a conversation between Confucius and a ruler in ancient China:

> Duke Ai [哀] of Lu [魯] inquired of Confucius, asking, "What must I do to gain the obedience of the common people?" Confucius answered, "Raise up the straight and place them over the crooked, and the common people will obey; raise up the crooked and place them over the straight, and the common people will disobey." (*Analects* 2.19)

This conversation reveals the reciprocity between the ruler and the people. Confucius expects that the commoners will obey if their ruler raises the straight, but that they will disobey if the crooked is raised instead.

Elsewhere in the *Analects*, the same metaphors are used again. Here, the meanings of "straight" and "crooked" are elaborated:

> The Master said, "If you promote the straight into positions above the crooked you can make the crooked straight" … "Rich indeed are the Master's words!" said Zixia [子夏]. "When Shun [舜] ruled the land, he selected Gao Yao [皋陶] from among the multitude and promoted him, and the perverse gave them a wide berth. When Tang [湯] ruled the land, he selected Yi Yin [伊尹] from the multitude and promoted him, and the perverse gave them a wide berth." (*Analects* 12.22)

[5] For similar interpretation, see Hsiao 1979: 111 and Yao 2000: 156.

Considering that both Gao Yao and Yi Yin are acknowledged as great ministers in ancient China, "to raise the straight" means that a ruler must elevate only those who are qualified to help him govern.

If "straight" ministers incline the people to obey, it is important to ask what qualities marked Gao and Yi as exemplars. In the *Mencius*, the story of Yi is told in a relatively elaborate fashion. According to Mencius, Yi possesses the supreme quality of governance, that is, *virtue* (*de* 德). As Mencius says,

> There are three things which are acknowledged by the world to be exalted …. At court, rank is supreme; in the village, age; but for giving help to the world and ruling over the people it is virtue [*de* 德] …. Tang had Yi first as a tutor and only afterward did he treat him as a minister. As a result, Tang was able to become a true king." (*Mencius* 2B2)[6]

Thus, "to raise the straight" means to raise ministers who can help the ruler govern the people with virtue (*de*). Virtue as the supreme quality of governance is also endorsed by Xunzi 荀子. For example, he argues that, for a minister, "to use one's virtue (*de* 德) to envelop one's lord and thereby transform him is the greatest kind of loyalty" (*Xunzi* 13: 170–171); and that a lord "who captures a people by means of virtue (*de* 德) will become a true king" (*Xunzi* 15: 575–576).[7] It is clear that Mencius and Xunzi agree upon the importance of virtue in politics. It is also undoubtedly the position of Confucius: "Governing with virtue (*de* 德) can be compared to the situation of Pole Star, which dwells in its place while the multitude of surrounding stars pays its homage" (*Analects* 2.1).

"Governing with virtue (*de*)" involves the ruling class's care for the people. Indeed, Confucius praises a statesman of his time, Zichan 子產, as a man of moral excellence. Zichan presents four great virtues: he is "gracious (*gong* 恭) in deporting himself, reverential (*jing* 敬) in serving his superiors, generous (*hui* 惠) in attending to needs of the common people, and appropriate (*yi* 義) in employing their services" (*Analects* 5.16). The last two qualities are specifically related to governing the people. Accordingly, to be "generous" to the people, the ruling class must "make sure there is sufficient food to eat and sufficient arms for defense" (*Analects* 12.7). To be "appropriate," they must "employ the service of common people only in the proper seasons" so that their agricultural activities and livelihoods are not compromised (*Analects* 1.5), and in bad years they should reduce the tax to help them (*Analects* 12.9). Thus, Confucius' demand to "raise up the straight" and "govern with virtue (*de*)" are all directed to the welfare of the people. They also determine, as *Analects* 2.19 states, whether the people will obey or not.

This discussion reveals a potential challenge to a theory of political obligation grounded in these texts. In the literature on political obligation, the standard way to describe one's theory is to demonstrate that "the people should obey the state because of principle X." In the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*, however, we cannot find a single passage where Confucius directly articulates such a principle. Instead,

[6] I rely upon the translation of Lau 2005.

[7] I rely upon the translation of Hutton 2014.

they instruct the elite to promote the welfare of the people and expect that the ordinary people will obey accordingly. Critics may note that "will obey" differs considerably from "should obey." While "should obey" has moral connotations and is related to a theory of political obligation, "will obey" is simply an expectation without moral weight. For example, one "will obey" the laws merely because of the fear of legal punishment, but this fear has no moral connotation and implies no obligation. Since Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi do not lay out the direct arguments about why people "should obey" the state, it is hopeless, critics might continue, to locate a theory of political obligation in early Confucianism.

However, I argue that when the three early Confucian masters expect that commoners "will obey," this expectation has a clear moral assumption. To reveal this, we should pay attention to the words and analogy they use to describe the relationship between rulers and commoners. In light of this, I find that Rosemont and Ames's idea, though they offer insufficient supporting evidence, is on the right track. Gratitude is the basic principle of Confucian political obligation.

To begin, Confucius does not merely recommend that the ruling class should promote the welfare of the people. He takes the further step of describing the ruler's benevolence as political largesse (*ci* 賜). Confucius argues, "When Guanzhong [管仲] served as prime minister of Duke Huan [桓], he enabled the Duke to become the leader of the various feudal lords, uniting and bringing order to the empire. Even today the people still benefit from his largess (*ci* 賜)" (*Analects* 14.17). The Chinese character 賜 (*ci*) has the connotation of hierarchy, representing a gift that a superior bestows upon his inferiors (L. Wang 2000: 1334). The term "largesse" (*ci* 賜) thus analogically transforms a ruler's benevolent policies into gifts for the commoners. Accordingly, when Confucius expects that the commoners "will obey" in response to the ruler's benevolence, he anticipates gratitude on their part. The expected exchange between largesse and gratitude is confirmed by Mencius. He states, "When a Counsellor [i.e., the superior] sent a gift (*ci* 賜) to a Gentleman (i.e., the inferior), the Gentleman … had to go to the Counsellor's home to offer his thanks" (*Mencius* 3B7).

This gratitude-based interpretation is further supported by Confucius when he notes that it is right to "repay beneficence (*de*) with gratitude (*de*)" (*Analects* 14.34). Many translations have been made of this paragraph. For example, Legge translates it as "recompense kindness (*de*) with kindness (*de*)" (Legge 1971). To Lau, it is "repay a 'good turn (*de*)' with a 'good turn (*de*)'" (Lau 1979). However, in the translation of Ames and Rosemont on which I rely, while the first *de* is translated as "beneficence," the second is represented by the English term "gratitude."

We encountered the possibility of rendering the two *de* as beneficence and gratitude respectively in Ames's translation of *Analects* 2.19 above. At that point, I argued that given the existence of a dominant and different understanding of the same passage, Ames must support his interpretation with additional textual evidence. Otherwise, his gratitude-based interpretation of Confucian political obligation is inconclusive. Unfortunately, in Rosemont and Ames's translation of *Analects* 14.34, they also do not explain why they believe that *de* can connote both beneficence and gratitude.

In what follows, I will supplement this discussion with further evidence to support Rosemont and Ames's passing interpretation of *de*. As we will see, *Analects* 2.19 and 14.34 can support a gratitude-based account of Confucian political obligation.

Indeed, Ames and Rosemont's translation has strong support from semantic scholars. Donald J. Munro, for instance, argues that at the time of Confucius, "one key component in the meaning of *de* (德) was the eliciting of a response of … gratitude from the people" (Munro 1969: 193). Likewise, David S. Nivison insists that, in many classical texts, when X exhibits *de* toward Y, it means Y owes X a reciprocal debt of gratitude (Nivison 2003).

Furthermore, in a detailed analysis of the evolution of the concept of *de*, Scott A. Barnwell notes that *de* has multiple meanings in ancient texts. In general, it means virtuous behaviors. For instance, Confucius says, the "*De* (德) required to hit the mark … is of the highest order" (*Analects* 6.29). In this context, *de* is a general term to signify "virtuous behaviors" (Barnwell 2013: 78).

In another context, *de* specifically denotes the reciprocity between moral leadership and emulation. For example, *de* as "virtuous behaviors" is too abstract to help us understand this saying: "The *de* (德) of the exemplary person is the wind, while the *de* (德) of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend" (*Analects* 12.19). Barnwell argues that the two occurrences of *de* here may specifically denote the moral example of a virtuous person and the subsequent emulation of the virtuous commoners (Barnwell 2013: 34). Here, Barnwell's interpretation of *Analects* 12.19 is similar to the mainstream understanding mentioned above.

Barnwell suggests that *de* can also particularly refer to an actor's virtue of "benevolence." Consider this poem in the Confucian *Classic of Odes*, "No words go unanswered, no *de* (德) goes unrequited. (If you) throw me a peach, (I'll) requite you a plum" (cited in Barnwell 2013: 63). It makes little sense to render this *de* in the *Odes* as moral leadership as in *Analects* 12.19. Instead, it might represent the virtue of goodwill and benevolence in the peach-giver (Barnwell 2013: 63).

Indeed, Barnwell's interpretation of *de* in the passage from the *Odes* is consistent with Xunzi's understanding. When Xunzi interprets the very same passage, he also equates the ruler's *de* with benevolence. To him, a ruler without *de* is one who "snatches away the people's wealth … [and] food … and so makes difficulties for the people's affairs" (*Xunzi* 10: 185–190). A ruler's malevolence will easily make his people disobey his orders. Xunzi thus concludes, "These things happen for no other reason than that the ruler of men brings it upon himself. The Odes says, 'no words go unanswered, *de* (德) goes unrequited.' This passage demonstrates my reasoning" (*Xunzi* 10: 190–195). Xunzi's interpretation of *de* as benevolence helps us verify Barnwell's study.[8]

Moreover, since the reciprocal exchange of benevolence and gratitude is an admirable social interaction, it is not difficult to understand that *de*, as a general virtue, can also specifically describe a beneficiary's appropriate and virtuous display of "gratitude" to one's benefactor.

[8] Mencius also equates *de* with benevolence in *Mencius* 4A14. In this passage, Mencius explains why Confucius is angry at one of his disciples, Ran Qiu 冉求. He argues, "While he was steward to the Ji family, Ran Qiu doubled the yield of taxation without being able to improve their virtue (*de*). Confucius said, 'Qiu is no disciple of mine. You, my young friends, may attack him openly…' From this it can be seen that Confucius rejected those who enriched rulers not given to the practice of benevolent government" (*Mencius* 4A14). In this passage, *de* means "benevolence" instead of "moral leadership."

Barnwell gives us an example recorded in a classical Confucian text, the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Zuo's Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*). In this story, the states Jin 晉 and Chu 楚 are fighting a war. A Jin official, Zhi Ying 智罃, is arrested by the State of Chu. After negotiation, the King of Chu agrees to release Zhi in exchange for his son who is captured by the Jin. Upon Zhi's departure, the King of Chu asks, "That being so, do you feel *de* toward us? … [And] upon your return, how will you requite us?" Since his release was the calculated result of the prisoner swap, Zhi replies, "Your lordship … has done nothing to deserve *de* … I don't know what needs to be requited" (cited in Barnwell 2013: 67). In this passage, the *de* expected by the King should be interpreted specifically as Zhi's supposed gratitude.

The semantic study of *de*, therefore, gives us a relatively safe ground to reiterate a Confucian theory of political obligation based on gratitude. Now we have more confidence to follow Ames and Rosemont's translation and read Confucius' "repay *de* with *de*" in *Analects* 14.34 as "return beneficence (*de*) with gratitude (*de*)."As for the case of "when the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend" in *Analects* 12.19, we can also say that Ames's translation in the previous section is a possible reading. Given the multiple meanings of *de* in the classical context, it is plausible to render the two occurrences of *de* in this passage as a description of the reciprocity expected between the ruler's virtue of benevolence (the blowing wind) and the commoners' virtue of grateful obedience (the bending grass). Most importantly, if Confucius instructs us that one should "return beneficence (*de*) with gratitude (*de*)," then when he argues that the commoners "will obey" a ruler who governs with the virtue of benevolence (*de*), it seems safe to say that his moral justification is that the commoners "should obey" the ruler because of gratitude (*de*).

Indeed, additional evidence in the *Analects*, *Mencius,* and *Xunzi* can bolster our confidence in this gratitude-based interpretation. The first such support appears when Mencius uses the Chinese character 恩 *en* (lit. "kindness") in his critique of a king. He says, "One becomes a true King by tending the people …. The people have not been tended because you fail to practice kindness [*en*];" moreover, Mencius continues, if the King can extend his kindness (*en*) to the people, "the people will find it easy to obey him" (*Mencius* 1A7). In Chinese linguistic contexts, when one receives another's kindness (*en*), gratitude is presupposed as the appropriate moral response. For example, the Chinese idiom *wang en fu yi* 忘恩負義 (forget kindness [*en*] and violate appropriateness) is used to criticize ungrateful behaviors. The phrase *zhi en tu bao* 知恩圖報 (acknowledge another's kindness [*en*] with the intention to requite), on the contrary, is used to extol one's gratefulness. Accordingly, when Mencius asks a ruler to practice kindness (*en*) so that the people "will obey," his moral expectation from the commoners is, again, their gratitude.

Moreover, while Confucius and Xunzi do not use the character 恩 *en* to describe the ruler's benevolence, they nevertheless apply its synonym *hui* 惠 (lit. "generosity") to describe the ruler's benevolence to the people (L. Wang 2000: 313). For instance, Confucius says that a noble person "is generous (*hui*) in attending to the needs of the common people" (*Analects* 5.16) and argues that if a ruler treats the commoners generously (*hui*), he can effectively employ their service (*Analects* 17.6). Xunzi reaffirms this relation between generosity and obedience. He says, "A Son of Heaven follows the Way and virtue completely. His wisdom and generosity (*hui* 惠) are profound.

Facing south, he renders decisions for the whole world, and all those living as commoners are … fully compliant with him" (*Xunzi* 18: 260–265). As mentioned, the two Chinese characters, 恩 *en* and 惠 *hui*, presuppose the reciprocal exchange of gratitude for benevolence. When Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi use these two words to explain the commoners' obedience, the moral assumption is gratitude.

The parent-state analogy employed in the *Mencius* and *Xunzi* is yet another piece of evidence for the exchange of benevolence for gratitude between the ruler and the common people. For example, in his critique of a ruler, Mencius argues, "The people look hungry and in the outskirts of cities men drop dead from starvation. If one who is father and mother to the people cannot avoid showing animals the Way to devour men, wherein is he father and mother to the people?" (*Mencius* 1A4). In another place, Mencius similarly argues that a benevolent ruler will easily keep his subjects' obedience because "since man came into this world no one ever succeeded in inciting children against their parents" (*Mencius* 2A5). Despite his disagreement with Mencius' interpretation of human nature, Xunzi concurs with Mencius' parent-state analogy. For example, he says that a true king "nurtures and raises the people as though caring for a newborn …. For this reason, the commoners love him as their own fathers and mothers, and marched out to die for them without hesitation" (*Xunzi* 11: 600–615). In the literature on political obligation, the parent-state analogy is taken as the sign of a gratitude theory. The analogy presupposes that between the ruler and commoners, as between parent and child, Confucian political obligation is an exchange of benevolence for gratitude.

Precisely, as the parent-state analogy indicates, the Confucian theory of political obligation is a *paternalistic* argument of gratitude. It assumes that the ruler is parent-like and capable of making considered decisions for the politically incapable and dependent commoners. While the ruler should rule, the people should be ruled. For example, Confucius states that because of their lack of intellectual capacity, "the common people do not debate affairs of the state" (*Analects* 16.2). Similarly, Mencius argues, "There are those who use their minds and there are those who use their muscles. The former rule; the latter are ruled" (*Mencius* 3A4). Xunzi further affirms Mencius' hierarchically political division by comparing the commoners to "newborns" (*Xunzi* 11: 600–615), and states that the benevolent ruler's work is to "watch for the people … care for the people … and order the people" (*Xunzi* 10: 200–215). Yuri Pines summarizes Confucian paternalism nicely:

> The very idea that the government should be conducted by the most able, moral, and intelligent men made contradictory the notion of sharing this responsibility with morally and intellectually impaired commoners. These are the origins of Confucian paternalism: the people deserve provision for their welfare, their interest should be of the utmost importance to the rulers, their feelings should be taken into consideration—but their direct input in decision-making is mostly undesirable. (Pines 2009: 211)

To many political theorists, the parent-state analogy is not convincing. If parental power is justified on the ground of a child's immaturity, then it is problematic to apply this justification to the relationship between the state and its citizens. After all, full citizens are adults with the capacity to reason, and their consent is a necessary

condition of just government. They are entitled to participate in decision-making instead of being excluded from it. Many liberals, being aware of the implication for political inequality, thus view the paternalistic argument of gratitude as a problematic theory of political obligation. Consequently, they have "dispense[d] with the analogy between political and familial relationships and [sought] to derive a citizen's obligation to comply with the law from a general principle of gratitude" (Walker 1988: 193). To make this distinction clear, I call the argument from a general principle of gratitude *liberal gratitude*. In a theory of liberal gratitude, the reciprocity between the state-benefactor and citizens-beneficiaries does not require the latter "to surrender moral autonomy" (McConnell 1993: 206), or to "compromise self-respect … by [being treated] as dependent creatures" (Knowles 2002: 20). For theories based on the parent-state analogy, Confucian political obligation included, I suggest the term, *paternalistic gratitude*.[9]

By highlighting paternalism in Confucianism, my interpretation of the Confucian theory of political obligation faces two potential challenges. First, some may suggest that, by questioning the people's political ability, Confucian paternalism has authorized the elites to determine the meaning of benevolence. If the elites' decision must be benevolent, then the commoners must gratefully obey. Consequently, Confucian paternalistic gratitude simply reasserts the popular notion that Confucianism demands absolute obedience. However, it should be noted that, to Confucians, what counts as benevolence is not entirely at the ruler's discretion. For instance, Confucius argues that the commoners may not want to be educated (*Analects* 16.9), but in general they want "sufficient food to eat and sufficient arms for defense" (*Analects* 12.7). In short, Confucian benevolence must meet the people's basic needs. Surely, the commoners cannot remonstrate and participate in the policy-making process, but they do not need a paternalistic genius to tell them whether they are hungry or in danger. They can unmistakably judge these outcomes based on their personal experience. Thus, in the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*, if a ruler's policies cannot secure the commoners' security and lives, they are justifiably empowered to defy his orders (e.g., *Analects* 13.6; *Mencius* 1B12; *Xunzi* 10: 170–200), vote with their feet and emigrate to other countries (e.g., *Analects* 13.4; *Mencius* 2A5; *Xunzi* 14: 35–60), and even betray the original ruler by supporting an occupying force initiated by a benevolent prince from another state (e.g., *Mencius* 1B10; *Xunzi* 9: 510–525).[10] As

[9] Confucian paternalistic gratitude is not unique in the literature on political obligation. In Plato's *Crito*, for instance, the personalized laws also use the parent-state analogy to demand Socrates's grateful obedience (Plato 1997). The analogy also appears in Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* where he states, "As the father over one family, so the king, as father over many families, extends his care to preserve, feed, clothe, instruct and defend the whole commonwealth" (Filmer 1991: 12). As Confucius treats a ruler's benevolence as the gifts to the people, Filmer also considers the monarchical policy as "bounty or indulgence of the king … [that] are granted with a condition implied … loyalty and obedience" (Filmer 1991: 56). These are just two of many possible examples.

[10] It should be noted that Confucian paternalistic gratitude does not support revolution by the common people. Briefly, Confucian revolution is not only about the overthrow of a tyrannical ruler, but also about the establishment of a new and benevolent government. Given their presupposed lack of education and wisdom, Confucians do not believe that the commoners can complete these dual tasks. To them, only a member from the ruling class "whose mettle has already been tested" is entitled to lead a revolution and depose a bad ruler (Tiwald 2008: 273).

should be clear, political disobedience is an integral part of Confucian paternalistic gratitude.

Second, Joseph Chan has rejected the usage of "paternalism" to characterize Confucian political philosophy. He argues that paternalism indicates "coercion aimed at improving the well-being of the coerced…. [But] Confucius not only does not affirm the use of force to promote people's virtues or well-being, he explicitly discourages it" (Chan 1999: 225). Surely, Confucius discourages coercion (e.g., *Analects* 12.19, 20.2). Mencius and Xunzi discourage the use of it as well; indeed, both of them happen to use the same words to discourage coercion by arguing that a benevolent ruler will not "perpetrate one wrongful deed or to kill one innocent man" (*Mencius* 2A2; *Xunzi* 11: 15–20). If paternalism is entirely about coerciveness, then Confucianism is not paternalistic.

However, it should be noted that paternalism need not to be entirely coercive. Good parents act in the interest of their children. They set good examples to model their children's behaviors. They listen to their children's opinions to reach a considered decision and try to educate the children why it is good for them. This need not involve coercion to be effective. As Nicholas Fotion points out, "Daddy's role is neither exclusively nor primarily that of a benevolent policeman" (Fotion 1979: 194). Only when children repeatedly disregard the instructions and put themselves in harm's way will good parents enforce discipline. "Analogously," Fotion continues, "it would be misleading … to treat the concept of paternalism when applied to the state … as one closely akin to an enforcer" (Fotion 1979: 194).

In other words, when I say that Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi's argument is paternalistic, I do not suggest at all that they promote *coercive paternalism*. However, to borrow William Theodore de Bary's terminology (de Bary 1998: 70), I do suggest that the Confucian paternalistic argument is one closely akin to *benign paternalism*. Confucian benign paternalism prioritizes a benevolent ruler's care and uses legal discipline against wrongdoers as the last resort of governance. As a benevolent political parent, "the people are of supreme importance" (*Mencius* 7B14). He inspires his political children, the people, by his moral examples (*Analects* 12.19). To make considered decisions to benefit the populace, he is willing to listen to and investigate the viewpoints of "the men in the capital" (*Mencius* 1B7), and to "gather opinions… [and] broadly hear cases" in the state (*Xunzi* 12: 275–280). Of course, as a political parent, he still makes the final decisions for the people after he takes their opinions into consideration. Finally, he is not categorically against punishment (*Analects* 13.3; *Mencius* 1B7). To him, however, legal punishment is the last resort, a final measure taken only when a person enjoys his benevolence but reciprocates it with stealing, killing, and other crimes. Xunzi's argument helps us summarize Confucian benign paternalism in a structured manner. He says:

> In managing affairs and interacting with the people, to change and adapt with rightness; to be kind, generous, and broadly accepting; to be reverent and respectful in order to lead them—this is the starting point for government. Only afterward does one investigate matters and decide cases with evenhandedness and harmoniousness, in order to guide them—this is the high point for government. Only afterward does one advance some and dis-

> miss others, punish some and reward others—this is the final matter for government…. If one uses the final matter as the starting point, then government orders will not be effective, there will be resentment and hatred among superiors and subordinates, and chaos appears on its own from this. (*Xunzi* 14: 75–90)

It should be clear that Confucianism prioritizes a ruler's care for the people and discourages the use of coercion in governance. Still, it is paternalistic because it consistently maintains that the ruler should rule for the people. But it is not coercive; rather, it is benign paternalism.

In addition to the two-point responses to the potential critiques, the distinction between coercive and benign paternalism helps us finally put forward an important characteristic of Confucian paternalistic gratitude, namely, that a benevolent ruler does not need to exact grateful obedience. For example, Mencius argues, "When people submit to a virtuous ruler, they do so sincerely, with pleasures in their hearts" (*Mencius* 2A3). Xunzi concurs by saying that "those who are nearby will delight in a benevolent ruler … those who are far away will run to him…. All the men of understanding will submit to him" (*Xunzi* 8: 85–90). That is, if coercive paternalism focuses on enforcing the commoners' obedience, Confucian paternalistic gratitude maintains that the people will happily demonstrate their grateful obedience to a benevolent ruler without being asked for it. To force people to be obedient without showing care for and listening to the people first, as Xunzi suggests, is the cause of "resentment and hatred among superiors and subordinates" (*Xunzi* 14: 75–90). All in all, to Confucians, a benevolent ruler does not need to exact grateful obedience. In fact, people's lack of gratitude is usually an indicator of policy failure, or, worse still, the ruler's straying from the Confucian Way.

In sum, my study of the theory of Confucian political obligation begins with the *Analects* 2.19 in which Confucius gives a metaphorical justification for political (dis)obedience. In order to clarify the meaning of this passage, I then cross-reference the *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*. I assume that if we could find a consensual view on political obligation in these three texts, we might successfully triangulate the early Confucian answer to the question of why people should obey the state. Accordingly, by being attentive to the words (i.e., *ci* 賜, *de* 德, *en* 恩, and *hui* 惠), and the analogy (i.e., the parent-state analogy) Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi used to describe the reciprocal relationship between the ruler and the common people, it is fair to conclude that they share a theory of paternalistic gratitude.

In summary, the theory of paternalistic gratitude is the Confucian answer to the question of why people should obey the state. In its paternalistic element, the theory assumes that the ruler-commoner relation is similar to the relation between parents and children. Since parents should make decisions for the children, the ruler should also rule for the people. In its gratitude element, the idea is that just as children should feel and express an obligation of gratitude to their loving parents, the people should also be grateful to a benevolent ruler and demonstrate their gratefulness by supporting and complying with him. The Confucian theory of political obligation is reciprocal, and the moral principle underlying this reciprocity is paternalistic gratitude.

4 The Politics of Paternalistic Gratitude

My goal of attempt to clarify the theory of Confucian political obligation is not simply to muse over China's remote past. Indeed, as we will see, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has begun to appropriate Confucian theory of paternalistic gratitude to justify its demands for Chinese citizens' obedience, and the theory that I have clarified serves as a normative standard to evaluate the politics of Confucian political obligation in China.

Despite its vehement attack on Confucianism in the past, the CPC today has gradually mended its relationship with this old foe.[11] One indicator of the Party's political appropriation of Confucianism is its presence in the quinquennial international conferences organized since 1989 to commemorate Confucius' birthday. In the following analysis, I choose the *People's Daily* to analyze the Party's words and deeds in a series on this event. The *People's Daily* is the official newspaper of the CPC and serves "as the chief conduit of official interpretations of all political, economic, social, and cultural events—domestic and international—to party members and society at large throughout the country" (Lynch 1999: 90). An analysis based on the *People's Daily* can, therefore, help us adequately understand, at least at the rhetorical level, the CPC's official attitude toward Confucianism.

The data for this study is collected through the *People's Daily Online Database* (*Renmin Ribao Tuwen Shujuku* 人民日報圖文數據庫). From 1989 to 2019, there are eleven articles focusing on the Party leaders' engagement with the quinquennial international conferences. As we can see from Table 1, it is clear that the CPC has consistently paid great attention to this event. First, among the eleven articles in the *People's Daily*, eight are on the front page, one on the second, and two on the third. All belong to the section of "Important News (Yao Wen 要聞)." Moreover, since the first quinquennial international conference in 1989, top Party leaders have presented in each of these events. The peak of the Party presence was in 2014 when the president of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the General Secretary of the CPC, Xi Jinping 习近平, delivered the keynote speech in the opening ceremony of this international conference.[12]

Another consistent pattern in the *People's Daily* is that the party leaders' attitude toward Confucianism has been positive. If we compare this positive tone

[11] Surely, as John Makeham points out, the Party is unable to single-handedly orchestrate the revival of Confucianism without support from society (Makeham 2008). The context for this revival since the 1980s, on the one hand, is increasing popular interest in Confucianism (Billioud 2007), and the cultural nationalists' aspiration to reformulate China's politics and society in line with its cultural traditions (Guo 2004). On the other, the craze for Confucianism at the grassroots level also functions as a social support to help the Party tap into Confucianism to strengthen its legitimacy, which was already eroded during the ten-year catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution and further damaged after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown (Holbig and Gilley 2010).

[12] Jiang Zemin 江澤民 also engaged with the quinquennial international conference in 1989, as the General Secretary of the CPC, and in 1994, as the President of the PRC. In 1989, Jiang met the delegates from the conference at the Beijing Hotel, and, in 1994, he received the delegates in the Great Hall of the People. However, unlike Xi Jinping, he did not attend the opening ceremony, let alone deliver a speech at this event (*People's Daily* 1989b, 1994c).

Table 1 *People's Daily* on the Quinquennial Commemoration Conference

Page	Participant	Article Title (abridged)
1st	Jiang Zemin 江澤民 General Secretary of CPC	Jiang Zemin Meeting with Friends from the Conference on Confucius (1989b)
1st	Gu Mu 谷牧 Vice-Chairman of PCC*	Scholars Commemorating the 2540th Anniversary of the Birth of Confucius (1989a)
1st	Jiang Zemin 江澤民 President of PRC	Jiang Zemin Meeting with Confucian Experts and Scholars (1994c)
1st	Li Ruihuan 李瑞環 Member of PSC**	Li Ruihuan Speaking on the 2545th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth (1994b)
2nd	Li Lanqing 李嵐清 Vice Premier of PRC	Li Lanqing Speaking on the 2545th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth (1994a)
1st	Li Ruihuan 李瑞環 Member of PSC**	Li Ruihuan Meeting with Scholars on the 2550th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth (1999b)
3rd	Luo Gan 羅幹 Member of CPC's Politburo	The 2550th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth Being Held in Beijing (1999a)
1st	Jia Qinglin 賈慶林 Member of PSC**	Jia Qinglin Speaking on the 2555th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth (2004)
3rd	Jia Qinglin 賈慶林 Member of PSC**	Jia Qinglin Speaking on the 2560th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth (2009)
1st	Xi Jinping 習近平 President of PRC	Xi Jinping Speaking on the 2565th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth (2014)
1st	Wang Qishan 王岐山 Vice President of PRC	Wang Qishan Attending the 2570th Anniversary of Confucius' Birth (2019)

*PCC = People's Political Consultative Conference

**PSC = Politburo Standing Committee

with the CPC's past animosity toward Confucianism, the change is significant. For example, between 1949 and 1988, the *People's Daily* only published two articles focusing on Confucius' birthday. In 1988, it announced that China would collaborate with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to commemorate the 2540th Anniversary of the birth of Confucius in 1989 (*People's Daily* 1988). The other was in 1974. The article lampooned Confucianism as the "spiritual pillar" of the Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (Jiang Jieshi) government's fascist oppression in Taiwan and criticized both its domestic celebration of Confucius' birthday and international promotion of Confucianism as a complete farce (*People's Daily* 1974).

However, in the series of the quinquennial commemorations of Confucius' birth since 1989, the Party leaders' comments on Confucianism, as reported by the *People's Daily*, have all been commendatory. In 1989, for instance, Jiang Zemin pointed out, "Confucius is a great thinker in ancient China. His philosophy is the precious cultural heritage of our country" (*People's Daily* 1989b). In 1999, Li Ruihuan located Confucianism as the foundation of Chinese culture and argued that Chinese history has demonstrated that Confucianism can help solve many of humanity's problems (*People's Daily* 1999b). In 2009, Jia Qinglin, again, called Confucianism "the mainstream of traditional Chinese Culture." Jia concluded his speech by urging his audience to introduce Confucianism to

the world and to enhance the international impact of Chinese culture (*People's Daily* 2009). In 2014, Xi Jinping also admired Confucianism as "the important component of traditional Chinese culture," and "Chinese nation's key source of nourishment for its continuous growth and strength." "This fine cultural heritage," Xi continued, "offers useful inspiration for reforming the world, handling state affairs, and improving individual morality" (*People's Daily* 2014).

Notwithstanding its changed attitude, the CPC has not converted to Confucianism yet. As Xi Jinping emphasized in his 2014 speech at the 2565th Anniversary of Confucius' birth, "the members of the CPC are Marxists who uphold the scientific theory of Marxism and insist on the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*People's Daily* 2014). In fact, in their continuous engagement with the quinquennial international commendations, the Party leaders have consistently specified "keeping the essential while discarding the dross" (*qu qi jinghua qu qi zaopo* 取其精華去其糟粕) as the party-endorsed scientific method to find inspiration from Confucianism. The method of critical inheritance not only helps the Party maintain a certain distance from Confucianism, but also notifies the public that the selected Confucian essential must serve the CPC's political goals such as the domestic development of "China's Socialist Progressive Culture" (*Zhongguo Shehuizhuyi xianjin wenhua* 中國社會主義先進文化) (*People's Daily* 2004), or the international initiative of "Building a Community with a Shared Future for Humanity" (*goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti* 構建人類命運共同體)" (*People's Daily* 2019).

All in all, the content analysis of the *People's Daily* reveals: (1) the now continuous endorsement of the Confucian revival from top Party leaders; (2) the evident shift of the Party's tone, from derogatory to commendatory, toward Confucianism; and (3) the instrumental value of Confucianism to the CPC. At any rate, it is fair to say that the Party's explicit support for Confucianism is conditioned on its political utility.

Does the CPC follow the criteria established by the Confucian normative standard in its political use of this philosophy? The answer to many scholars is negative. For example, the CPC has used Confucianism to argue for the incompatibility of Chinese culture and human rights in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Nevertheless, Joseph Chan revisits *Analects* and *Mencius* and demonstrates that there are resources in these classics able to support a Confucian perspective on human rights (Chan 1999). In the face of the CPC's possible manipulation of Confucianism for its political purposes, Chan, moreover, recommends that we engage with Confucian philosophical thought to "prevent politicians from hijacking Confucianism" (Chan 1999: 214). To conclude my study of Confucian political obligation, I will follow Chan's recommendation and try to use the theory of paternalistic gratitude to critically examine the CPC's politics of Gratitude Education (*gan'en jiaoyu* 感恩教育) in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.

The examination is based on two case studies offered by Bin Xu and Christian Sorace (Xu 2016; Sorace 2014, 2017). To begin, what we see clearly in the Party's post-earthquake propaganda is its use of the Confucian parent-state analogy to highlight the CPC's benevolence. According to Xu, the Sichuan earthquake represents a discursive shift in the Party's response to major natural disasters. By comparing

Party propaganda in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake with its responses to other major natural disasters since the founding of the PRC, Xu finds that historically, the CPC's narrative of disaster management prioritized the theme of "'man conquering nature' … in which leaders of the mighty socialist state … led the heroic Chinese people … to 'conquer' [the disaster]" (Xu 2016: 410). In the Party's propaganda after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, however, the major narrative has changed to "paternalistic compassion," a theme drawing on Confucianism in which "the government … must display its sympathy with … the people's suffering by providing substantive assistance" (Xu 2016: 420).

Specifically, during the post-earthquake rescue, the Party propagated the idea of the state leaders' parental love for the people. For example, Chinese citizens were exposed to the image of Premier Wen Jiabao 溫家寶 comforting students still trapped under the collapsed buildings by shouting through a megaphone, "This is Grandpa Wen Jiabao! Hang on, children! We will rescue you" (cited in Xu 2016: 412). In another televised scene, Premier Wen spoke to a surviving child with a firm promise of parental care, "Don't cry! Don't worry! The government will take care of you, will take care of your life and studies" (Xu 2016: 412). It would be odd for Americans if President George W. Bush introduced himself as Grandpa George to the victims of Hurricane Katrina and promised full governmental responsibility for their lives and studies. But Wen's paternalistic performance was intensively reported in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake, and the media even appropriated a familiar Confucian motto to praise "Grandpa Wen" as a leader who "loves the people as he loves his children" (*ai min ru zi* 愛民如子) (cited in Xu 2016: 419).

In the politics of paternalistic gratitude, the state's love demands the citizens' grateful return. During the rescue period of the Sichuan earthquake, the imperative of emergency relief might sideline this request. However, the Party reasserted its expectation for gratitude throughout the lengthy period of post-earthquake reconstruction. Sorace gives us an eyewitness account of the interaction between the state and the survivors under the political demand of gratitude. Sorace finds that, in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake, the Party held on to the principle "that people cannot be trusted to participate in decisions that impact their future" (Sorace 2014: 423) and, in many cases, "never asked villagers what they wanted or to participate in the reconstruction" (Sorace 2017: 31). Nevertheless, the Party considered the reconstruction plans "were proof of the Communist Party's benevolence … [and] the Party expected the recipients to feel as well as display a deep sense of gratitude" (Sorace 2017: 154).

The authoritarian politics of gratitude unavoidably opens up a gap between the government's policies and the victims' actual needs. Many victims might think that they have benefited from the Party's reconstruction and therefore feel grateful to the state. However, Sorace is more interested in the growing conflict between the Party and the survivors during the reconstruction. He finds that the Party's reconstruction plans did not always address the needs of local residents. For example, one of the survivors complained about his relocation from a village to a suburban area:

> The main advantage of moving to this location is it is more convenient for transportation. The disadvantages are living in these multistory homes. Water, electricity, gas, and food all require money. In the past, I didn't need to pay money in order to burn firewood; we also grew our food …. Now we cannot raise pigs and we are far away from our land …. If they let us repair our old houses and build a courtyard-style house where we could raise pigs and chickens, that would be ideal. (Sorace 2017: 98)

Many similar complaints about the gap between governmental relief and personal needs are well recorded in Sorace's study. The main source of the victims' grievance was always the problem that "[w]hat the Party built was not always what the people wanted, and in some cases made their lives worse off than they were before the earthquake" (Sorace 2017: 154).

Nevertheless, the victims' complaints did not change the Party's decision-making style. Instead, the CPC launched the campaign of "Gratitude Education" (*gan'en jiaoyu* 感恩教育) to exact the earthquake survivors' gratitude. Sorace notes that many cadres he interviewed described this campaign "as a form of traditional moral pedagogy in which one learns how to 'be a person'" (Sorace 2017: 35). Indeed, like the propaganda of parent-state analogy in Xu's case study, the Gratitude Education campaign is traditionally Confucian. The Chinese phrase 感恩教育 (*gan'en jiaoyu*) can be translated as "the education (*jiaoyu* 教育) to recognize (*gan* 感) kindness (*en* 恩)." As I discussed above, for example, Mencius also uses the Chinese character, 恩 *en*, to describe a ruler's kindness to the people and argues that if the King can extend his kindness, "the people will find it easy to obey him" (*Mencius* 1A7). Moreover, the Gratitude Education campaign also seems to resemble the historical practice of Confucianism. For instance, from 1724 to 1912, the Qing 清 dynasty's nationwide, grassroots, and semimonthly public lecture on the *Amplified Instruction of the Sacred Edict* (*Shengyu Guangxun* 聖論廣訓) was also propaganda about the ruler's paternalistic benevolence and the expected reciprocal gratitude from the commoners (Lee 2020).

In the case of the Sichuan earthquake, the goal of the Gratitude Education campaign was to handle the victims' growing discontent about the reconstruction and to educate them to recognize the Party's benevolence. Accordingly, in July 2010, the Sichuan Government issued "the Notification to Launch a Gratitude Education Campaign in the Elementary Schools in the Disaster Zone" (*People's Daily* 2010). Under this directive, a local Party leader in the earthquake-afflicted area gave a speech to other cadres explaining the importance of the campaign. He argued, "We need to promote a culture of gratitude and use this culture of gratitude to eliminate socially discordant elements … and increase society's sense of happiness by making people's agitated, blind, and impractical attitudes return to reason" (cited in Sorace 2017: 36). As a part of this Campaign, local schools also began to mobilize students to various gratitude activities such as "'letter writing to Grandpa Wen,' exchanging 'short stories of gratitude,' 'gratitude essay writing contests,' and activities to 'sing songs of gratitude' that will 'engrave in one's memory the Party's kindness'" (Sorace 2017: 35). In addition, written slogans, such as "When you drink water, remember the well-digger; we rely on the Communist Party for happiness," and

"Be grateful to the mighty Communist Party for our new roads, new bridges, and new house," were plastered across the disaster zone to remind people of the Party's benevolence and the moral necessity of their grateful response (Sorace 2017: 3).

However, Sorace argues that the Gratitude Education campaign was, in effect, a form of political violence. As the Party leader's speech above indicates, the campaign was not merely intended to exhort gratefulness but also "to eliminate socially discordant elements … by making people's agitated, blind, and impractical attitudes return to reason." Critics of the reconstruction were thus stigmatized by the Party as being ungrateful and immoral, and, moreover, they were cast as insidious threats to social harmony and happiness. In Sorace's study, this political stigmatization was consequential to the social interaction of earthquake survivors. For example, he reports that many victims "admitted that they [did] not dare express their grievances out of fear that others [would] label them as selfish and greedy and socially ostracize them" (Sorace 2017: 12). Worse still, the political stigmatization also helped the Party justify its disciplinary methods when punishing post-earthquake dissidents who would not "return to reason." As Sorace reports, "The disaster victims, human rights activists, and lawyers who refuse to comply [were] monitored, harassed, detained, beaten, and in some cases arrested—a situation that continues to this day" (Sorace 2017: 12–13). To put it concisely, in the Gratitude Education campaign, political dissidents are designated as "wayward" children whose "ungratefulness" requires parental discipline.

In sum, in a break from its past opposition to Confucianism, the CPC has begun to appropriate Confucian ideas to strengthen its one-party rule. One of the political uses of Confucianism is the Gratitude Education campaign. In the case of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, concepts drawn from the Confucian theory of political obligation such as the idea of kindness and the parent-state analogy were used by the Party in its Gratitude Education campaign. The political purpose was not only to exact the earthquake survivors' gratitude, but also to engineer political stigmatization encouraging social ostracism and justifying political discipline against people who refused to comply with the government. As Sorace puts it, the Party's Gratitude Education campaign was effectively an attempt to mandate gratitude (Sorace 2017: 34–38).

The case of the Sichuan earthquake thus demonstrates the gap between the theory and politics of Confucian political obligation. The CPC's Gratitude Education campaign lifted the Confucian concepts out of the original theoretical context and turned Confucius' benign paternalism into the Party's coercive paternalism. As discussed already, Confucian benign paternalism does not coercively demand the people's gratitude. The early Confucians maintained that a ruler should listen to the people's concerns before making decisions. Although it is not democratic rule by the people, this process of opinion gathering is theoretically designed to ensure that public policies address people's actual needs, and consequently, ensure that they will gladly obey with genuine gratitude. In the Confucian theory of paternalistic gratitude, the people will be grateful to a benevolent ruler without this feeling being demanded by the state.

However, the CPC's Gratitude Education campaign in Sichuan is, in effect, closely akin to coercive paternalism. During the earthquake reconstruction, first of all, the Party "never asked villagers what they wanted" (Sorace 2017: 31), and

then, unavoidably, "made their lives worse off" (Sorace 2017: 154). In the face of the public grievance, the Party finally launched the Gratitude Education campaign to self-righteously declare its benevolence and punished the dissidents in the name of "ungratefulness." By forcing people to comply without actually benefiting them, the Gratitude Education campaign has twisted Confucian benign paternalism into coercive paternalism. The Party's critical inheritance of the Confucian theory of paternalistic gratitude is, to say the least, a misapplication.[13]

5 Conclusion

In this article, I offer a fresh explanation of the Confucian theory of political obligation. Following Confucius' arguments in the *Analects* and referring to the *Mencius* and *Xunzi* for clarification, I provide abundant textual evidence to demonstrate that the Confucian theory of political obligation is an argument from paternalistic gratitude. Moreover, I use the Confucian theory of paternalistic gratitude to examine the CPC's politics of Confucian political obligation in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Although Confucian-sounding references figure into the Gratitude Education campaign, the CPC's politics of political obligation cannot meet the normative standard established by Confucian philosophy. The Party has hijacked the Confucian theory of political obligation to serve its authoritarian purpose, and the coercive paternalism of the Gratitude Education campaign serves as an example of the CPC's use of Confucianism for its non-Confucian goals.

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[13] Indeed, the Gratitude Education campaign is not limited to post-Sichuan earthquake reconstruction. For example, it can be found in Tibet (Yeh 2013) and Xinjiang (*The New York Times* 2019), where ethnic minorities, despite the regime's oppression, are forced to profess gratitude to the CPC. Also, the most recent case is in Wuhan, China, where the CPC intends to launch the Gratitude Education campaign to solicit city residents' support for the Party's handling of the outbreak of the coronavirus in 2019 (Reuters 2020).

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