

A Comparative Analysis of Political Legitimacy in the Great Learning and Plato's Republic

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Abstract

Political legitimacy constitutes a foundational problem in political philosophy, concerning the justification of authority and the conditions under which power is recognized and obeyed. This paper offers a comparative analysis of political legitimacy as articulated in two classical texts of the Axial Age: The Great Learning in the Confucian tradition and Plato's Republic in ancient Greek philosophy. Situating both works within their respective historical and intellectual contexts, the study argues that they present distinct yet structurally comparable models of legitimacy. Confucian political legitimacy is grounded primarily in moral virtue and the Mandate of Heaven, emphasizing internal moral cultivation, ethical governance, and popular support as manifestations of Heavenly will. By contrast, Platonic legitimacy derives from external transcendence, locating political authority in the philosopher-king's grasp of eternal truth and the Form of the Good. Through textual analysis and conceptual comparison, this paper examines how virtue, wisdom, justice, and truth function as sources of political legitimacy in the two traditions. By highlighting both their shared rejection of coercive power and their divergent transcendental foundations, this study seeks to contribute to comparative political philosophy and to reflect on the contemporary relevance of classical legitimacy theories for modern governance, leadership ethics, and education.

Keywords

political legitimacy, the great learning, Plato's Republic, Confucianism, comparative political philosophy

1. Introduction

The issue of legitimacy runs through the history of political philosophy and is central to the justification of power. Only when the reasons and basis for political power are legitimate can the authority held by a political subject and its exercise in governing society gain widespread recognition and support from the people, thereby achieving social stability. In the seminal sociological work of Max Weber, *Economy and Society* [1], he first systematically defined political legitimacy as a core sociological concept: The legitimacy of a system of domination is to be regarded sociologically only as the probability that there will exist a corresponding degree of appropriate attitudes and of practical conduct in compliance. He also used this concept to classify and compare social and political phenomena. In the *Second Treatise of Government* by John Locke [2], he provided a classic definition centered on the consent of the governed, arguing that government is not legitimate unless it is carried on with such consent. Together, their work established the fundamental theoretical framework for modern discussions of political legitimacy. An analysis of the two

classical texts, *The Great Learning* [3] and *The Republic* [4], suggests that in the West, reason and deliberation underpin legitimacy, while in China, the Mandate of Heaven and virtue serve as its foundation. These respectively constitute the typical paradigms of rational legitimacy and moral legitimacy. Research on such classical political thought not only helps re-examine these foundational texts but also aids in reflecting on and building a more harmonious society. However, within the study of Confucian political legitimacy, existing scholarship has predominantly focused on Mencius and Xunzi, while the pivotal value of *The Great Learning* as a systematic text has long been relatively neglected. Moreover, although preliminary comparative studies between China and the West exist, there remains a gap in both the quantity and depth of systematic comparative research that focuses specifically on the concept of political legitimacy itself between *The Great Learning* and *The Republic*. This review primarily adopts the methods of textual analysis and comparison. It aims to classify and explore the ideological content and practical paths of power legitimacy articulated in these two classical texts.

2. Axial Age Context and Textual Background

2.1 The Axial Age and Political Crisis

The concept of the Axial Age was first proposed by Karl Jaspers in his 1949 German work *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (*The Origin and Goal of History*) [5]. As he articulated, the axis of world history seems to lie around 500 BC, in a spiritual process that took place between 800 and 200 BC. There lies the deepest turning point in history. It was then that the humans with whom we still live today appeared. We can call this era the Axial Age. Both *The Great Learning* and *The Republic* were composed during this pivotal period.

2.2 The Great Learning: Authorship, Transmission, and Political Orientation

Mainstream scholarship dates *The Great Learning* to the early Warring States period (475–221 BC). This era witnessed momentous political upheavals, such as the Tian clan's usurpation of the Qi state and the partition of the Jin state by the Three Clans. The enfeoffment system and ritual order established in the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046–771 BC) had collapsed entirely, and the aristocratic wars between states gradually evolved into wars of annexation. In contrast, *The Republic* was written in 4th-century BCE Athens, Greece—toward the end of the Classical period—when the city-state's democratic system was declining, and Athens itself was entering a phase of gradual decay. Both texts emerged amid political chaos, profound social transformations, and ideological transitions, addressing the shared epochal question: How to establish a new order and ensure the legitimacy of the new regime? This common historical context provides a foundational basis for their comparative analysis. The author of *The Great Learning* remains unconfirmed. Nevertheless, it is universally acknowledged that *The Great Learning* preserves the legacy of Confucius, reflecting Confucian ideas of China's classical period and closely aligning with the teachings of Confucius and Xunzi. Traditional scholarly interpretations of *The Great Learning* have predominantly focused on individual self-cultivation, with relatively little attention paid to its nature as a political text exploring state governance. Zheng Xuan, a Confucian scholar of the late Eastern Han Dynasty, noted: *The Great Learning* is so named because it records extensive knowledge applicable to governing the state [6], highlighting the text's inherent political function. Throughout *The Great Learning*, emphasis is placed on why and how rulers should cultivate their moral character, alongside the imperative for rulers to align with the Mandate of Heaven. This reflects the Confucian assertion that political legitimacy derives from both the Mandate of Heaven and the ruler's personal virtue, with virtue as the decisive factor. Only by embodying virtue can a ruler conform to the Mandate of Heaven and gain the acceptance of the people, a perspective that also embodies people-oriented thought.

2.3 Plato's Republic: Philosophical Aims and Political Concerns

In *The Republic*, Plato employs a dialogic form, speaking through Socrates to explore the isomorphic relationship between justice and soul order. He divides the individual soul into three components—reason, spirit, and desire—and examines the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Plato advocates for the ideal city-state to be governed by philosopher-kings who possess these noble virtues, constructing the polity based on the Form of the Good. For Plato, political legitimacy originates from the

grasp and application of the Form of the Good—i.e., eternal truth—differing fundamentally from Confucianism's focus on the Mandate of Heaven and ethical virtue. Western scholarship on The Republic has centered primarily on political philosophy and ethical philosophy.

3. Comparative Analysis of Political Legitimacy

3.1 Interpretations of Political Legitimacy in the Two Texts

3.1.1 The Great Learning

Rulers were required to demonstrate Heavenly approval through personal virtue, which gave rise to the Confucian concept of governing by virtue. The Great Learning opens with the assertion: The way of great learning consists in illuminating one's bright virtue (mingde), in renewing the people, and in abiding in the highest good. Mingde (illuminating virtue) refers to the cultivation and manifestation of inherent moral goodness, while abiding in the highest good signifies the attainment of universally admired moral perfection. The text emphasizes that to govern the state and regulate the family, one must first cultivate oneself, underscoring the primacy of virtue. The theme of virtue has long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry. Beyond securing Heavenly approval, virtue was even more crucial for gaining the acceptance of the people, as popular will (minyi) was regarded as a manifestation of Heavenly will (tianyi). This gave birth to Confucianism's original people-centered thought. The term qinnin (renewing the people) in The Great Learning—as interpreted by Han Dynasty Confucian scholars such as Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda—means treating the people like family. In contrast, Neo-Confucian scholars, represented by Zhu Xi, reinterpreted it as the ruler's duty to help the people purify themselves of selfish desires [7]. Regardless of interpretation, both emphasize the ruler's obligation to benefit the people, embodying the spirit of governing for the people. This thought was further developed and enriched by the Mencian school. Lou Yanli's *Heaven's Mandate and Popular Support: An Analysis of Mencius' Discourse on the Legitimacy of Monarchical Power* argues that only a virtuous ruler who practices benevolent governance possesses legitimate authority [8]. Thus, Confucian legitimacy emphasizes ethical cultivation as the foundation of political authority.

3.1.2 The Republic

In Plato's *The Republic*, political legitimacy originates from the wisdom inherent in the philosopher-king. Only when a philosopher-king who grasps truth rules can the city-state's governance be considered legitimate. The paper *Plato on the Rule of Wisdom* elaborates the author's perspective on the principle of rule by wisdom advocated by the philosopher Plato, arguing that rule by wisdom is not equivalent to rule by law [9]. In Li Yonggang's *The Debate on Three Political Models in Plato's The Republic*, he states: Truth refers to the pursuit of eternal and unchanging things, namely the Forms, while the constantly changing world of reality is an ocean of opinion. A philosopher is one who has emerged from the cave of opinion and has beheld the highest Form, that of the Good [10]. Furthermore, understanding the Form of the Good constitutes the highest knowledge or skill, which is the knowledge comprehended and mastered by the philosopher-king. In Plato's framework, knowledge constitutes authority; thus, the philosopher-king's comprehension of truth confers political legitimacy. Some scholars also point out that Plato's theory of political legitimacy establishes legitimacy upon the interdependent relationship between justice and temperance (*Plato as a Theorist of Legitimacy*) [11]. Therefore, the two crucial elements of political legitimacy are justice and temperance. The American philosopher John Rawls argues: Justice is the first virtue of social institutions [12]. Liu Danchen, in his *A Comparative Study of the Governing Thoughts of Confucius and Plato*, summarizes that the souls of citizens in *the Republic* should possess four virtues: first, wisdom; second, courage; third, temperance; and fourth, justice. Among these, justice and the good constitute the foundation of Plato's political philosophy [13].

4. Core Conceptual Differences between Plato and Confucian Thought

4.1 Confucian Foundations of Political Legitimacy

To date, there is no systematic literature review dedicated to the Confucian concept of political legitimacy. However, numerous related concepts have been extensively studied, such as the Mandate of Heaven,

governing with virtue, and people-centered thought. In essence, Confucianism identifies two fundamental sources of the legitimacy of political power: the Mandate of Heaven and the Dao Tong (The theoretical system of inheritance and legitimacy in Confucianism). The concept of the Mandate of Heaven, a traditional Chinese political ideology rooted in the earliest sacrificial practices of Chinese civilization, is closely intertwined with the Five Elements (Wuxing) theory, forming an elaborate sacrificial system. Scholarly discussions on the synthesis and summary of the Five Elements theory are abundant. As a document dating back to the Shang Dynasty, The Book of Documents (Shangshu) [14] records Jizi's exposition of the Nine Categories of the Great Plan to King Wu of Zhou, asserting that Heaven bestowed upon Yu the Nine Categories of the Great Plan. This text frames the Five Elements as manifestations of Heavenly Dao and links the Five Elements system to the legitimacy of imperial rule: the Xia Dynasty obtained the Mandate of Heaven by aligning with the Five Elements, while Gun incurred Heavenly wrath for disrupting the order of the Five Elements during his flood control efforts. This laid the ideological foundation for subsequent dynasties to justify their rule through the Five Elements theory. Gu Jiegang's Discourses on Ancient History (Gushi Bian) [15] delves into the interplay between the Five Elements theory and the construction of ancient historical narratives, with multiple essays focusing on how the historical accounts of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties interpenetrated with the Five Elements and the theory of the Cycle of Five Virtues (Wude Zhongshi). A recent scholarly contribution to the study of the Five Elements theory is Wang Ping and Sheng Xianrong's *An Exploration of the Origins of Zou Yan's Theory of the Cycle of Five Virtues* [16]. The authors argue that Zou Yan, with Confucianism as the core, integrated Yin-Yang and Five Elements thought, endowing the three dynasties with specific virtues (de) and framing dynastic transitions as a cosmic process governed by the mutual generation and conquest of the Five Elements. This transformation of political change into a manifestation of Heavenly Dao conferred legitimacy upon ruling dynasties. Following the collapse of the patriarchal clan system and ritual order of the Western Zhou Dynasty, and continuing until the early Han Dynasty, the new political order secured its legitimacy by shifting from Heavenly bestowal to the concept of the unity of Heaven and humanity (Tianren Heyi). Wang Mengxi and Wang Zhenzhong's *The Formation and Development of the Concept of the Unity of Heaven and Humanity in the Pre-Qin Period* [17] elaborates in detail on the evolution of the relationship between Heaven and humanity from a one-way connection to bidirectional interaction during the Shang Dynasty and the Pre-Qin period.

4.2 Greek and Platonic Conceptions of Political Legitimacy

In ancient Greece, political legitimacy was derived from natural justice. As said in *Dialogues on Political Legitimacy: Ancient and Modern, Chinese and Western* [18], some scholars argue that political order not only originates from the natural cosmic order but is also subordinate to it. Initially, the moral justification for human political order necessarily came from another transcendent realm—the cosmic order. This represents a path of external transcendence. Ancient Greece practiced democratic politics, and democracy inherently belongs to a typical form of rule by law. Since laws were established for the people or even by the people, individuals were expected to possess an unprecedented motivation to sincerely obey the laws—that is, the commands of the community. This resembles Max Weber's later notion of Legal-Rational Authority. In contrast, within the philosophical system constructed by Plato, which regards the world of Forms as a crucial concept, political legitimacy follows the path of external transcendence. The rule of the philosopher-king is legitimate precisely because only the philosopher-king possesses the truth derived from the external world. As Wang Jikui points out in *The Logical Starting Point of Politics: A Comparative Analysis of The Analects and The Republic* [19], since the essence of philosophy is the love of wisdom, *The Republic* pursues the unity of intellectual authority and political authority. Knowledge is power, and since truth represents the highest level of knowledge, the philosopher-king who masters truth possesses the authority to rule. This reflects a trend toward the ethicalization of politics. In contrast to Confucian internal transcendence, Platonic legitimacy derives from external, metaphysical sources.

5. Theoretical Frameworks and Methodological Approaches in Existing Research

Regarding the theories of political legitimacy commonly employed by contemporary scholars, they include: Niccolò Machiavelli's theory of power efficacy (an amoral political perspective), which introduces the concept of reason of state, with his representative work being *The Prince* [20]; John Locke's theory of limited government and natural rights, with his representative work being *Two Treatises of Government*;

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of the general will, with his representative work being *The Social Contract* [21] (Zhang Zhen's *On the Legitimacy of Political Power: An Exploration Based on Rousseau's 'Social Contract Theory'* provides a detailed account of previous studies on Rousseau's theories [22]), Max Weber's tripartite typology of authority—traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic—with his representative work being *Economy and Society*; Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics and deliberative political theory, with his representative work being *Legitimation Crisis* [23]; and Alfred Edward Taylor's related theories on Plato and Aristotle [24]. Concerning the political interpretation of *The Republic*, the two most influential and divergent schools in contemporary Western academia are the dramatic school represented by the American scholar Leo Strauss [25] and the analytical school represented by the British scholar Karl Popper [26]. The primary research methods are documentary analysis and conceptual comparison. This involves analyzing traditional and classical texts, incorporating relevant scholarly theories, comparing the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western perspectives, and exploring their respective views on political legitimacy—that is, the issues of domination and subordination, and the relationship between rule and obedience.

6. Recent Developments in Comparative Studies

In the process of comparative research, previous scholars have become more cautious about whether to apply Western theories directly, with the primary goal being to establish China's own discourse and a systematic philosophy (as discussed in Ren Jiantao's *The Question of Legitimacy in the Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Political Thought* [27]). This issue has gradually evolved into a problem of the comparability of specialized terminology and concepts. For example, generally speaking, traditional Chinese thought does not question the legitimacy of a father's authority. If the state is an extension of the family, then we may not necessarily question the legitimacy of the state either. Therefore, the issue of comparability forms the foundation for conducting cross-cultural research. Furthermore, in current comparative research, greater emphasis is placed on perspectives from translation studies and lexicology. This involves, firstly, focusing on the accuracy of specialized terminology during translation, and secondly, emphasizing the analysis and differentiation of specialized terms and concepts. For instance, the concept of legitimacy faces confusion from two directions: first, it is increasingly equated with justification; and second, it tends to become blurred with legality. This often leads to changes in terminology during translation, resulting in conceptual confusion.

7. Conclusion

In summary, both works can be interpreted from a political perspective, focusing on the issue of political legitimacy. However, the paths they emphasize are not entirely the same. Although they indeed share common ground—both hold that legitimacy cannot rely solely on power or coercion. They each emphasize the importance of the ruler's personal virtue. For example, Confucianism's Sage-King and Plato's Philosopher-King. The former relies on benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom, while the latter relies on wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Yet, Western philosophy, represented by Plato, follows a path of external transcendence, attributing political legitimacy to the existence of an external, transcendent world (truth). The Philosopher-King is innate, and the capacity to attain truth is inherent. It was not until the modern era, beginning with Machiavelli, that political legitimacy in the West acquired a realistic and secular character. In contrast, Confucianism follows a path of internal transcendence. The sage attains the transcendent character of the Heavenly Way through human nature and innate moral consciousness (liangzhi). Anyone can carry the Heavenly Way. Furthermore, ethical morals have long been deeply embedded in the traditional Chinese political system, where politics and family ethics are inextricably linked. Analyzing the different Chinese and Western perspectives on political legitimacy helps us understand the complementarity of virtue and reason in Chinese and Western political philosophy and promotes mutual learning between Eastern and Western civilizations. Simultaneously, political legitimacy is significant not only for answering questions about the legitimacy of ancient political rule but also holds reference value for modern governance, leadership ethics, and education. Future research will place greater emphasis on the analysis, translation, and comparison of specialized terminology and concepts. Therefore, learning foreign languages will be key to advancing cross-cultural research. Furthermore, whether it is appropriate to simply compare Chinese and Western cultures under the framework of modern Western theories (such as those of Machiavelli and Max Weber) warrants further investigation. Additionally, interpreting *The Great Learning*

as a political text rather than solely a text of personal cultivation represents an important direction for future research on political legitimacy, and even for re-reading Confucian classics. Future studies should further explore the translation accuracy of key concepts and investigate the applicability of classical legitimacy frameworks to contemporary governance.

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