

***The Relationship Between Good Governance and Elite Ruling: A Comparative Study on Mencius and John Stuart Mill's Political Philosophy***

Yan Deng, Reading Academy, Nanjing University of Information, Science and Technology, China

The Asian Conference on Ethics, Religion & Philosophy 2019  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Political philosophy is a popular area in comparative philosophy research. This paper aims to analyse the relationship between good governance and elite ruling by comparing Mencius and John Stuart Mill. As the second Sage of Confucianism, Mencius proposes benevolent governance and ruling by virtues, while Mill, the influential figure in utilitarianism and liberalism, emphasises the importance of democracy in the form of representative government. In this paper, the author uses an analytic approach to review the history of the political development of the two philosophers concerning this topic. She first conceptualises important terms relevant to the topic and summarises the methods proposed by each of these philosophers for adopting a system of elite ruling. By introducing the two philosophers' understanding of good governance, she offers a conclusion on how elite ruling can realise good governance. Four strategies are suggested. The first is that elite ruling can contribute to an effective and efficient small size government; the second places the emphasis on education; third are the specific strategies of protecting people's interests and taking care of their needs; and the final strategy proposes the acceptance of a certain degree of reformation.

Keywords: good governance, elite ruling, Mencius, Mill

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

How to realise good governance is a very important topic in political philosophy, both within Chinese philosophy and British philosophy. Democracy is undoubtedly a popular solution. Even though there is no exact counterpart in pre-Qin Chinese philosophy to refer to ‘democracy’, a similar term has appeared in pre-Qin texts, which is ‘people-orientated’ (民本). There is also a strong notion of respecting and taking care of the citizens in early Confucianism, particularly in the philosophies of Confucius and Mencius.

Why have I chosen specifically to compare the two philosophers, Mencius and Mill? Mencius was born almost 2000 years earlier than Mill, which explains the huge differences between the historical and cultural contexts in which they lived. However, they both made clear descriptions about their ideal theory of what a good government should be, and they both argued for the necessity of involving elites in the ruling class. In Mencius’s book, he asserts the goodness of human nature, and believes that the virtue of a good ruler will lead to good governance. A commonly found term, *Junzi*, or ‘noble people’, in Confucianism refers to a member of a virtuous class. They practise *Ren* and *Li*, and they collectively influence the society and offer suggestions to the ruling class in a state. Mencius therefore believes that benevolent governing is required for a state to remain powerful and for a ruler to gain the respect from their people. According to Mill, he trusts that selected elites can make reasonable decisions for their country and its government. He claims an effective government is ruled by chosen representatives who demonstrate a superior standard of morality and intelligence. In this sense, there are similarities and differences in terms of the exact relationship between good governance and elite ruling in both philosophers’ theories, which also justifies my motivation for comparing their philosophies.

## The Conceptualisation of Elites

It is necessary to investigate the origins of the term ‘elites’ in Chinese and Western traditions as it helps us to understand the political argument which encourage the engagement of elites.

In ancient Chinese language, the word ‘elites’ is written as ‘菁英’, which is pronounced ‘Jing Ying’. 菁 (Jing) refers to the essence of leek (Duan, 1815), while 英 (Ying) is regarded as a part of a plant as well. (Waley, 1996.) According to the English definition of ‘elites’, the word refers to ‘the richest, most powerful, best-educated, or best-trained group in a society’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). The original Latin form of this word is ‘ēligere’, which also refers to the best item or thing. Generally speaking, we can say that both Chinese and English definitions of the word ‘elites’ convey the meaning of ‘being the best’.

## Mencius’s Design

In Mencius’s philosophy, he asserts the goodness in human nature. He has a famous argument about people instantly feeling sympathetic when they see unfortunate incidents happening to another person. He proposes four essential virtues, which are sympathy (恻隐之心), shame (羞恶之心), modesty (辞让之心), and right and

wrong(是非之心). These four virtues can develop into benevolence (仁), righteousness (义), courtesy (礼), and wisdom (智). His emphasis on ethical politics leads to his political argument of good governance. By maintaining the essences of these four virtues, one can be a noble man. The noble men can help the rulers to achieve a benevolent government, which is beneficial for all people in the society.

Mencius presents a systematic ‘people-orientated’ theory. He says that ‘The people are most important; the state altars to the spirits of earth and grain come next; the ruler is last of all.’ (Eno, 2016: 7B). However, this does not mean he believes in the common people are offered freedom to deliver their thoughts without limitations or boundaries. One significant difference between Mencius and Mill lies in the concept of *Li* (礼, ‘rituals’). *Li* refers to a social order that everyone should have their role in society. It also corresponds to the way of Heaven and guarantees the harmony of a society.

His specific design can be understood from two perspectives. The first one is the very high requirement for the monarch or the ruler. In Confucian philosophy, one’s internal perfect morality can be translated into one’s external virtuous ruling. Mencius shares Confucius’s understanding of ‘Dao’ or ‘Way’(道). Their argument is based on the further development of the intrinsic benevolence in the minds of human beings which can be attributed to the benevolent policy of a state. They honour the ancient sage kings to show their appreciation of the sage hood of a ruler. Mencius says, ‘the Three Dynasties gained the world by means of humanity; they lost the world through being inhumane. And so it is with the rise and fall of the states. When the Son of Heaven is inhumane, he cannot protect the four quarters; when the lords of states are inhumane, they cannot protect their altars of state...’ (Eno, 2016: 4A). Similar passages appear several times in *Mencius*. Mencius intends to borrow the story of kings in the Three Dynasties to explain the practise of benevolent governing is justified by the mandate of heaven. The second perspective of Mencius’ approach lies in the value of people. Mencius believes in the value of citizens’ opinions and therefore encourages the monarch to take citizens’ advice seriously. He suggests the monarch to select talented people to help him make decisions, and he also claims that people should respect intellectuals.

### **Mill’s Choice**

As a utilitarian, Mill admits that it is in human beings’ nature to pursue happiness or pleasure. Brink (1992) offers an explanation that utilitarian philosophers embrace the value of ‘the greatest happiness’ and holds that the actions are right in proportion as how much they promote happiness. Their happiness can be interpreted in a way to pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. Mill’s adoption of measurement focuses on ‘happiness’ or ‘pleasure’, which is different from Mencius’s *Ren* (benevolence) or *Yi* (righteousness). However, Mill’s philosophy also reflects his optimism in human nature. He believes that an upper intellectual class should exert a disproportionate influence and they can act on basis of the greater good because of their noble characters and wise judgements. All of these thoughts can date back to Plato’s *The Republic* (Montgomery, 2011). In this sense, his optimism can be linked to Plato’s ideal society, just like Mencius’s optimism can be linked to Confucius’s faith in

constructing a society supported by *Li* and *Ren*. Both Mill and Mencius share a view on the possibility of the intellectual class playing a positive role in society.

Mill's argument specifically talks about the different influences imposed on society by different groups of people. Mill points out that before the large-scale establishment of democratic regimes, people were ruling in their own interests and taking care of their private needs (Wolff, 1996). Mill therefore argued against the assumption that a mass group can act as one while ignoring the individual needs of the minority group. The truth is, it is possible for the tyranny of the mass to appear in society. Without a fair way for both majority and minority groups to be represented, the decisions made can only represent the majority group's will, or more specifically, the will of the active members in the majority class. Mill believes that to achieve good governance, decisions should be made by the intellectual class voted by the people; otherwise, the society will become mediocre.

It is worth noting that a major difference setting Mill and Mencius apart is in their attitudes to individualism. Confucian philosophers believe that one learns for the sake of oneself. However, they embrace communism instead of individualism as the social order is more important than personal preferences in Confucianism. In Mill's account, he believes it is in human being's nature some part of the people to oppress another part of the people. Especially when a large group of people's opinion contradicts a small group of people, the larger group will win by abusing their power (Mill, 2015). In this sense, Mill is worried about the imbalance in society due to the absence of personal opinions and the lack of different voices. This argument can inform a broader understanding of the differences between Confucianism and liberalism.

### **What is good governance?**

The philosophy of good governance is associated with the definition of a good government. Before further analysing the relationship between good governance and elite ruling, it is necessary to understand the term 'good governance' from two perspectives: Confucian and Western.

As mentioned earlier, the expectation of a good monarch in Confucian philosophy is closely related to virtues. Confucianism claims the importance of family relationships. The way to maintain harmony in society is to respect one's ancestors and parents and to take care of one's siblings and children in a family context. The two core concepts of *Ren* and *Li* in Confucianism also complement each other. *Ren* can be translated as 'benevolence' or 'humanness'. It means showing love and care when interacting with others. *Li* can be translated as 'rituals' or 'rites'. Literally, it refers to appropriate events or etiquette in certain ceremonies. On a broader level, it can be understood as how one behaves in different situations and how to play one's role in a certain situation. For example, as a civil servant, one should always pay respect to the monarch. As a son or a daughter, one should always practice filial piety to one's parents. In Mencius's explanation, the kings in the first three dynasties are seen as great moral examples and political leaders because of their kindness to people. To realise good governance, Mencius believes that the monarch should show moral doctrines, be sympathetic to his people, and use *Ren* and *Li* to civilise his people. 'The Master said, "He who is not in any particular office, has nothing to do with plans for the administration of its duties"' (Legges, 2010: Book 8).

The Western definition can trace back to Aristotle's explanation. He claims it is one of the responsibilities of a ruler to help civilians to achieve goodness and practice moral doctrines. Mill also mentions that it is a valuable thing for a good government to prioritise kind behaviours and to raise awareness of moral standards among common people in everyday life (Mill, 2015).

Two components of good governance are mentioned by both philosophers: 'responsibility' and 'participation'. There is a Western tradition of suggesting that people with specialised political skills should be responsible for dealing with such matters. In both Mencius's and Mill's arguments, they encourage common people to engage in politics and take their corresponding responsibilities. However, they both admit the existence of different talents among people, so they accept different degrees of participation. Since allowing all people to play an equal role in political decision-making is impossible and unnecessary, Mill's ideal government is on a small scale and has a representative style. According to Mencius, his view includes a type of limited democracy. He not only advocates for the ruler to listen to opinions when offered, but also encourages the ruler to willingly collect advice from the people.

### **Conclusion: How can good governance be realised through elite ruling?**

Elites possess an advantageous position in society which means they are superior to the common people in terms of their knowledge, skills and moral characters. The big question raised here is how elite ruling can help to achieve good governance. In this section, four main methods will be discussed.

The first method is to adopt a small-sized government. In this way, political decisions can be made by a small number of people. This style of governance in this respect is highly efficient and effective. Even both philosophers admit the power of people of the necessity of taking care of people, they refuse to admit all people are equal in terms of making wise decisions. Confucian philosophers deny the value of the lower-class people as they are not well-educated and unable to understand *Dao* (the core principle in life). Mill, on the other hand, claims everyone's freedom to express their opinions. However, he does not believe the involvement of many people can lead to a fair and effective decision-making process. Mill and Mencius both believe in the fact that all people have their role to play in society, and we should trust the elites to represent common people's wills.

It is interesting that Mencius and Mill both include the significance of education and knowledge in elite cultivation and selection. They both argue for the necessity of involving talented people equipped with specialised skills in making political decisions. Offering adequate education and civilisation to common people is highly valued in Confucianism. In most time of Chinese history, rulers integrate the traditional and authentic Confucian thoughts in their elite selection process. For example, the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues are often encouraged in its teaching content of Confucian Classics. Later in Chinese history, the Quota System in the Han Dynasty and the Imperial Examination System which began during the Sui Dynasty also built and developed on these ideas. The elite selection cycle thus serves as an important way for the ruling class to be supplemented with intellectuals who share the same values. Mill also explains that a good government should be

accountable for the moral and intellectual education of its citizens. He mentions that an ideal government will ensure a virtuous and intelligent performance of all the duties of a good government by eminent individuals (Mill, 2015). Mill and Mencius both argue that through education, not only the talented can be selected to join government, but also the common people can be more involved with policy-making.

The third method is elite ruling also includes the idea of protecting people and helping them to earn sufficient income and gain enough resources in society. People need private properties and resources to survive and to guarantee their quality of life. Mencius uses the story of people in rural areas who are unable to serve their parents and nurture their wives or children to introduce his benevolent policies, and he thinks such individuals should blame the rulers whose obligation it is to help their people escape starvation (Eno, 2016). In his detailed description of an ideal society, the underprivileged people can be taken care of. He uses the example of people in their seventies who can have meat as their main dish to suggest a good sign of good governance. In Mill's claim, he believes that the government should represent the will of the people, not just because they are the selected group, but because they are the intellectually and morally superior group and so are more capable of making decisions to help their citizens to achieve wellbeing.

The last explanation is that elite ruling is not opposed to a certain degree of reformation. Clearly, good governance requires stability. However, this does not mean changes are not welcomed. Elites should be open-minded, able to accept criticism and different opinions, and capable of adopting new policies if they can benefit the people. Mencius discusses the justification to murder a monarch if he fails to do his political duty. Mill also encourages people to actively take part in government matters instead of obeying all the policies without critical views.

Overall, good governance is based on the intention to help people achieve virtues with trust in a small group of talented individuals making political decisions. Mencius and Mill have offered well-established accounts from their respective Confucian and utilitarian perspectives. Therefore, the main differences between their approaches lie in the specific measurement of interests in terms of realising good governance. The practice of benevolence and the respect for social order is closely associated with the outcome of good governance in Mencius's argument, while the collective good, especially pleasure, is the most crucial indicator of Mill's measurement.

## References

Brink, D. (1992). Mill's Deliberative Utilitarianism, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 21: 67–103.

Duan, Yucai. (1988). *Shuo Wen Jie Zi Zhu* (说文解字注). Shanghai:Shanghai Guji Press.

Elites. (2019). In Cambridge dictionary. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/elite?q=elites>.

Eno, Robert. (2016). *Mencius: Translation, Commentary and Notes*. Retrieved from [http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Mencius \(Eno-2016\).pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Mencius (Eno-2016).pdf).

Legges, James. (2002). *The Chinese Classics (Confucian Analects)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mill, John Stuart. (2015). *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Montgomery, Michael R. (2011). John Stuart Mill and Utopian Tradition. J. G. Backhaus (Ed.). *The State as Utopia: Continental Approaches. The European Heritage in Economics and the Social Sciences*, 9: 19-34.

Wolff, Jonathan. (1996). *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Contact email:** [doris.yan.deng@hotmail.com](mailto:doris.yan.deng@hotmail.com)