

## ARTICLE

# Sincerity (*cheng*) as a civic and political virtue in classical confucian philosophy

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**Abstract**

The paper reconstructs the classical Confucian approach to sincerity (*cheng* 誠) as a political virtue of the governing and a civic virtue of the governed. For Confucian thinkers, sincerity thus understood shapes both the rulers and the ruled in terms of the common good, and guarantees the stability of a just political system. It is shown that for Confucius and the *Zuo Commentary* one of the key political and civic virtues was reliability (trustworthiness, *xin*), which later came to be viewed as rooted in an inner virtue of sincerity, described by Mencius as natural, inherently moral, and social. The relation between moral and civic/political sincerity was then examined in the *Great Learning* and the philosophy of Xunzi. Their ideas were complemented in the later imperial period in the *Essentials of Governance* with a discussion of the connection between political sincerity and the virtue of loyalty (*zhong*).

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Modern political philosophers often point out that if the procedures of public legitimacy are to be efficient, citizens need to be concerned about the public good. This, as Sandel argues, “requires self-government, which depends in turn on civic virtue,” as “government cannot be neutral toward the moral character of its citizens” (1996, pp. 126–127). Civic virtues – virtues of people *qua* citizens – sustain civic participation and encourage the search for the common good. A vital virtue recently discussed in this context is citizens' sincerity (Schwartzman, 2011; Zoffoli, 2017). Interestingly, it was Rawls who had already introduced sincerity as a necessary condition for the stability of just governance (1999, pp. 401, 455–456) and a condition for reasonable and binding voting (1993, pp. lvi, 241–242, 248).<sup>1</sup> Sincerity also plays a key role in Habermas' social theory of communicative action as its basic transcendental claim (Heath, 1998). However, neither Rawls nor Habermas specifies whether sincerity is a one-way or a two-way requirement. On this score, contemporary Western political thought can be brought into a fruitful dialogue, rather than yet another antagonistic contraposition with Confucian Philosophy, which recognized sincerity (*cheng* 誠) as a pivotal civic virtue of the governed and a major political virtue on the part of the governing.<sup>2</sup>

To make this engagement possible, the paper offers a theoretical reconstruction of the Confucian approach to sincerity as a civic and political virtue based on its classical works: the *Analects* (*Lunyu*) ascribed to Confucius (551–479 BC), the *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan*), the *Great Learning* (*Daxue*), the *Application of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*), and the works of Mencius (372–289 BC) and Xunzi (298–238 BC). In addition, the paper refers to a later continuation of these discussions in the *Essentials of Governance* compiled in the Tang times, which testifies to the vitality and coherence of the classical Confucian understanding of *cheng*. The notion of civic virtues is usually applied to Confucianism as a tool of its adjustment to the conditions of constitutionalist democracy (Chaihark 2009; Mower, 2013; Kim, 2016) and it is only recently that their presence has been observed within classical Confucianism itself (Kim, 2020; Stalnaker, 2013). However, none of these approaches recognizes sincerity as either civic or political virtue, whereas the overviews of the classical Confucian view of *cheng* are focused solely its moral and metaphysical dimension (An, 2004, 2005; Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2017, pp. 41–57; Sim & Bretzke, 1994), with the single exception of a brief discussion of *cheng* as a political virtue in Mencius (Tao, 2005, pp. 71–73). Among these studies, only Sungmoon Kim distinguishes between political and civic virtue, understanding the former as “a special form of civic virtue pertinent to the ruler and other key political agents” (Kim, 2020, p. 19). Unlike Kim, to avoid using the confusing term ‘civic virtue of the king,’ I will identify the virtues of the governed as civic, and those on the part of the governing (both in their relation to the governed and between various political agents) as political. This convention follows the proposed reciprocal yet asymmetrical understanding of the relation between the governing and the governed in Confucian philosophy and the accompanying divergence from Kim’s ‘monist’ reading of moral and civic virtues in Confucianism, as is argued in Section 2.1.

## 2 | BEFORE SINCERITY: RELIABILITY (XIN) AS A CIVIC VIRTUE

### 2.1 | The *Analects* and civic virtues

The concept of “rule by virtue” (*dezhi* 德治) is one of the central ideas of Confucius’ political philosophy:

Those who rule by virtue may be compared to the Pole Star, which remains in its place while all the other stars turn towards it (...). If people are ruled by regulations and kept in line with punishments, they will just try to avoid them without feeling shame. But if they are led by virtue and disciplined by rituals, they shall have a sense of remorse and, moreover, a proper attitude (*Analects* 2:1.3).<sup>3</sup>

Note that Confucius does not offer any moralizing, nor does he make any normative statements: rule by means of virtue is said to be instrumental in sustaining the efficacy and stability of governance, which would otherwise fall apart as soon as the tyrant is gone. This could be seen as an implicit polemical debate with Legalist philosophers, who stated that since all people are afraid of being punished, the most efficient strategy of governing is harsh punishments.<sup>4</sup> Confucius argues instead that it is the steadiness of *moral attitudes towards those who rule* by virtue that translates into the solidity of their states. To ‘rule by virtue’ means, in turn, to ‘lead by example’ (*Analects* 13:1), which makes this relation reciprocal: the governing shine in (political) virtue, while the governed lean towards them (as long as they are “led by” their specific virtues).

Sungmoon Kim reminds us, however, that neither Confucius nor ancient Confucians recognized the analytical distinction between civic and moral virtues, seeing the continuum between the domains of ethics and politics, which Kim calls a ‘virtue monism’ (2020, p. 19). And it is certainly true that the Confucians did not believe in *distinctively* civic virtues that cannot be reflected in the area of one’s personal moral development (cultivation). On the other hand, Confucians were strongly inclined towards thinking of virtues in terms of *clusters*, the broad meaning of which varies depending on the relationship one finds oneself in, which explains why there is no need for introducing separate terms. At the same time, it is crucial to realize at which point a moral virtue (virtue of personal moral development)

becomes a civic one (virtue in relation to the governed and public good) or even a political one (should one be entrusted with political power), as each of these virtues (or aspects of the respective virtue) carries different moral and social obligations. As Tao Jiang (2021, p. 81) observes, “there is a significant degree of discontinuity between the familial and the political realms, contrary to much of the rhetoric in the *Analects*.” At times Confucius explicitly states that governmental matters are different from private affairs and that the qualities expected from an official are distinct from and more demanding than filiality and fraternity alone (*Analects* 13:14.20). Confucius's great disciple, Zi Lu (Zhong You; 542–480 BC), after talking to the Master about an old farmer's two virtuous sons who lived as recluses and refused to become ministers, is sent back to their village to reprimand them:

It is not righteous not to take office. If you cannot neglect the relation between elders and youngsters, how can you then discard the righteousness in between the sovereign and minister? You wish to keep your hands from getting dirty, yet allow chaos to be brought to that great relationship (*dalun* 大倫). An exemplary man takes office and performs the righteousness belonging to it (*xing qi yi* 行其義) (*Analects* 18:7).

Zi Lu, probably not without the suggestion of Confucius, is thus quite clear about there being a specifically political form of righteousness belonging to the relation between the ruler and the members of the state who are in office, which is seen as being different from (and also more needed and more difficult to find than) that between parents and their children, although ideally, the political should follow the familial.

## 2.2 | Reliability (*xin*) as a political and civic virtue in the *Analects* and *Zuo Commentary*

For Confucius and his disciples, however, one of the most vital virtues of the governed and the governing (civic and political, respectively) was not (yet) sincerity, but rather reliability (*xin* 信), also translated as ‘trustworthiness’ or (less accurately) ‘faithfulness.’ As Karyn Lai aptly observes, ‘reliability’ in the *Analects* has a cluster of meanings, bringing together the ethical aspects of acting reliably and the epistemological aspects of reliable knowledge. As Lai continues, “*xin* is particularly prominent in two relational domains. The first is friendship (...) The second domain is in government, specifically, in the relationship between those in power and the common people” (2018, pp. 193–194). Asked about the nature of government, Confucius replies that it can survive without arms and even food supplies, but not without the trust (*xin*) of the people (*Analects* 12:7), which is gained when those in power are trustworthy (*Analects* 1:5; 17:6; 20:1). In this way the people are given an example: “when a ruler loves trustworthiness, then none of his people will dare to not be honest” (*Analects* 13:4; Slingerland, 2003, p. 140), in accordance with the general structure of the “rule by virtue.” This makes the whole relationship reciprocal yet asymmetrical: the people transformed by the example of their leader try to earn his trust by means of their own reliability – political *xin* generates the civic one. This asymmetry is stressed in *Analects* 13:4, which argues that in response to the ruler's trustworthiness, the governed cultivate not so much trustfulness as the virtue of being honest (*yongqing* 用情, rendered by Legge (1960, p. 265) as “being sincere,” which is an antecedent of the later, mature concept of sincerity (*cheng*). Additionally, *xin* is believed to enable the people to genuinely address issues of public concern (analogously to modern civic engagement): “the gentleman remonstrates with his ruler only after having obtained his trust (*xin*); if he has not proven to be trustworthy (*xin*), the ruler may think that he is vilifying him” (*Analects* 19:10). And such an approach was not isolated at that time.

Reliability is seen as a core political and civic virtue also in the *Zuo Commentary* to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which was attributed to Confucius' contemporary and friend, Zuo Qiuming (556–452 BC). The *Commentary* is probably not quite that old, but also not later than 350 BC, and according to Yuri Pines (2002, pp. 16–39) there are strong arguments for believing that it reflects the political thought of the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BC). The Marquis of Jin, for instance, is said in the *Zuo Commentary* to have given up a siege for the following reasons:

“Reliability is the jewel of a state and something the people rely on. If I get Yuan yet lose my reliability, what then to depend upon? My loss would be much greater than my gain.” And he withdrew his troops (*Zuo Commentary* 6:25).

The Marquis was thus concerned with not being seen as unreliable mostly due to the implications of this opinion for the stability of his future rule over Yuan. He did not see this as his *personal* failure, firstly because he could be reliable yet have an unfavorable image and, secondly, as he spoke about a specific reliability in the eyes of the citizens of Yuan. In a similar vein, political reliability is put forth as necessary in the submission of one state to another, and as something that is “expected” in interstate relations (*Zuo Commentary* 18:27).

But the virtue of *xin* was not only referred to in top-to-bottom relationships. It is in fact most often evoked as a virtue accompanying the political practice of covenants (*meng* 盟), which were voluntarily joined on an equal footing by the parties which publicly accepted its terms. As Julia Tao writes, “it is the spirit of *xin*, faithfulness or sincerity, that gives *meng* its moral authority to bind people to action” (2005, p. 68). Indeed, the *Zuo Commentary* (13:11) reads that a covenant is beneficial only when “the equal parties prove their trustworthiness, and coming to an agreed meeting is the first proof of reliability.” Those who break covenants are, in turn, commonly hated as “inconstant” in their virtue and earn their punishment (*Zuo Commentary* 13:13), to the point that their names are deservedly omitted by historians from the official annals (13.2). As Yanming An shows, “constancy” (*chang* 常) and “oneness” (*yi* 壹) between one’s words and deeds became soon understood as an inner ground for externally recognized trustworthiness, thereby becoming historical antecedents of the notion of sincerity (1997, pp. 46–51). And already the *Discourses of the States*, compiled in the fourth century BC but also attributed to Zuo Qiuming, hold that Duke Hui’s reliability was only superficial as it lacked “sincerity inside” (*Guoyu* 9:20). Along with the development of the conceptions of human nature and the Confucian philosophy in general, it was sincerity that became discussed as an essential (although not solitary) factor in securing the proper relationships between the governing and the governed as well as between political actors. In fact, the joint term *chengxin* (used in modern Mandarin and often employed in business relations) appears in *Mengzi*, *Liji*, and several times in *Xunzi*, showing the intrinsic link between the two.

### 3 | SINCERITY (CHENG) AS A CIVIC AND POLITICAL VIRTUE IN CLASSICAL CONFUCIANISM

#### 3.1 | The nature of sincerity in Mencius

A model description of the Confucian approach to sincerity was given by Mencius. Mencius argues that one cannot bring order (*zhi* 治) to the people without having the trust of one’s superior, which can be obtained only by those who have first gained the trust (*xin*) of their friends and made their families happy, and this can be achieved only by those who turn toward themselves (*fanshen* 反身), probing their sincerity. Having said that, Mencius offers a tripartite definition of sincerity:

There is a way of being sincere: someone who is not clear about what is good cannot be sincere. That is why sincerity is the Way of Heaven, while reflection upon how to be sincere is the Way of Man. Never has there been one who had sincerity but was unable to move others (*Mencius* 4A:12).

The first sentence argues that sincerity presumes knowledge of the good it serves. One cannot do bad sincerely, and sincerity is not a virtue of form, such as straightforwardness, as one can be a straightforward liar or cheater. As Mencius maintains, an exemplary person may be deceived by “what seems to be as it ought to be,” but as long as her conduct is not contrary to its proper Way (*fei Dao*), there are no reasons to question her sincerity and reliability

(*chengxin*) or to accuse her of hypocrisy *wei* 偽 (*Mencius* 5A:2). That is why Mencius states elsewhere that sincere and heartfelt (*zhongxin* 中心) subjection is always based on the superior's virtue and never on coercion (*Mencius* 2A:3), which clearly echoes the passage from *Analects* 2:3 and situates the virtue of *cheng* also within the relations of power (between the subjected and the political subject).

Sincerity is, secondly, natural, in the sense that it is an inborn quality of human beings. This does not mean, though, that it is a part of our natural constitution shared with animals. On the contrary, that we are endowed with it and that we have a distinctive *moral* nature is due to an external instance – Heaven, which acts as an impersonal, god-like source of moral warrant in *Mencius* (Ivanhoe, 2007). This feature of sincerity also translates into the naturalness of true reliability, which has nothing in common with pretending: “a great man does not think beforehand of his words that they may be viewed as reliable (...) he just does what is right” (*Mencius* 4B:39). However, ‘doing what is right,’ while being natural to morally developed individuals, is by no means easy to achieve, and this also concerns sincerity, the ‘application’ of which in particular situations and dilemmas requires constant reflection/deliberation (*si* 思). An individual must first “turn toward itself and discover its sincerity” and avoid its practice without examining it (*Mencius* 7A:4). Commenting on the saying that “virtue alone is insufficient for the exercise of government,” Mencius praises those rulers who “had already done their utmost with the reflection of their hearts, so they went on to use governments that were not unfeeling toward others” (4A:1; Van Norden, 2008, p. 89), highlighting the importance of reflection in the employment of virtues specific to the relation between the rulers and the people.

Finally, sincerity is socially transformative (“able to move others”), since being sincere solely to oneself is not sincerity at all. Hence, not only is civic sincerity an extension of naturally endowed moral sincerity, but also the latter cannot be fully realized without the civic virtue of *cheng*, given the unavoidable character of the relations of power. This element is also stressed in the *Application of the Mean*, which asserts that “only those who perfected sincerity in the world are able to transform [others]” (*Mean* 24), that is: only those who have accomplished their civic sincerity are able to develop its political counterpart. The *Application of the Mean* explicitly repeats Mencius' tripartite definition of sincerity, but goes further in terms of its metaphysical characteristics, arguing that sincerity can “complete things” and lead to foreknowledge. The text goes as far to as to call *cheng* “the end and beginning of things” and compares it to spirit (*Mean* 25–26). The description of *cheng* from the *Application of the Mean* was historically of particular interest to later Neo-Confucian metaphysicians, but it does not tell us much about sincerity within political relations, unlike another part of the later Neo-Confucian Canon of Four Books, namely the *Great Learning*.

### 3.2 | Sincerity as a civic and political virtue in the *Great Learning* and *Xunzi*

The *Great Learning* offers a classical exposition of the continuous link between moral and civic sincerity, which follows the Mencian approach:

If knowledge is developed to the utmost, intentions are sincere; if intentions are sincere, then the mind is rectified and the person is cultivated. If persons are cultivated, their families are kept in line and then their states are put in order. When there is order in the states, there is peace in the world (...) What is called ‘being sincere in one's intentions’ allows no self-deception, as when we hate a bad smell and love what is striking. This is also called ‘being unassuming’ (...) It is therefore said that when there is sincerity within, it is manifested without (*Great Learning* 2–3).

The last sentence nicely summarizes the connection between the moral and civic aspects of *cheng*: sincerity as a virtue of personal moral development ‘resides’ within the sphere of inner life, but as soon as it reaches its fulfillment in the form of moral cultivation, it becomes manifested in social relations, from family relationships to a broad, ‘suprastate’ context. The values of “order” (*zhi*) and “peace” (*ping* 平), which are here shown to derive from an equipose within

one's intentions, are connected with political stability rather than any particular moral good, similarly to Confucius' argument of "rule by virtue" and in line with the opening of *Mencius* 4A:12. To put it simply, a stable state consists of sincere citizens (the passage does not mention the ruler's sincerity, but it is doubtful that the author would disregard its importance). This does not entail, though, an opportunist approach to sincerity: neither purposeful pretending nor unaware self-deception have such an effect. To know that one is not deceiving oneself, a deep knowledge of one's intentions is needed, and that is why such knowledge opens this chain argument.

The ideas from the *Mean* and the *Great Learning* were taken up by Xunzi, who agrees that sincerity is the principal factor in mind-cultivation, and when manifested as assisting the practice of charity (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*), it leads to changing and transforming others. As Tao Jiang (2021, p. 389) observes, Xunzi singles out *cheng* as a grounding virtue for the transformation of the uncouth world into a moral one. However, at the same time Xunzi distances himself from Mencius' deification of Heaven and the *Mean's* metaphysical speculations, writing that humane sincerity simply reflects and follows the "constancies" of nature; in this sense the four seasons or Earth also perform their own *cheng* (*Xunzi* 3:9). And the function of such a constancy is rather political, as in the following passage:

A noble man inspires awe without showing anger. His orders are obeyed with such diligence because he is vigilantly steadfast. The way that goodness works is such that if you do not have sincerity, then you will not be steadfast. If you are not steadfast (...), the people will not follow you, and even if they do follow they are sure to be suspicious of you (3:9; Hutton, 2014, p. 20, modified).

Political sincerity is thus shown as a necessary condition for smooth and stable rule. In fact, this dense passage ends with the statement that "sincerity is the basis for government affairs" and indicates the difference between, on the one hand, sincerity in the relations between father and son and, on the other, sincerity as related to "sovereigns and superiors" (*jun shang* 君上).

Sungmoon Kim rightly observes that whereas for Mencius civic virtue spontaneously extends from moral virtue, in Xunzi there is no straightforward connection between them, as civic virtues are required for the common people, who are bad by nature, to make them nonetheless comply with the political order, which leads Xunzi to an embrace of hegemony as a moderate ideal of statecraft (2020, p. 19). Indeed, Xunzi claims that those who run a (stable) state consisting of its sincere and reliable (*chengxin*) members (*shi* 士) and do not base their government on rituals and righteousness can be called "hegemons," but not yet true kings (*Xunzi* 11:7). In this case, Xunzi sees civic sincerity as equally responsible for the stability of a state. In the grand scheme of things, however, Xunzi seems to prioritize the role of political sincerity. He argues, for instance, that any ruler needs a direct circle of favorites who can be trusted, thus their sincerity is the "precious equipment" of the state (*Xunzi* 12:11). This notwithstanding, Kim's opinion that, in contrast to Xunzi, civic virtue in Mencius holds no 'independent significance' goes too far, given such Mencian concepts as "sincere and heartfelt submission", whereas for Xunzi the civic *cheng* is, throughout 3:9, the very same sincerity that participates in the process of mind-cultivation and assists the practice of moral virtues of *ren* and *yi*. An image of discrete domains of civic and moral virtue which then partially or totally overlap is imposed upon both Mencius and Xunzi, who, just as other Confucians, conceived of the virtue of sincerity as running through gradually complex relations, so that at some point – usually 'above' family relationships – it becomes a civic virtue. The biggest difference between these approaches lies elsewhere, in the discussion of the relation between the civic and the political – the virtues of the governed and the governing. While the *Great Learning* focuses only on the function of civic sincerity and Mencius tries to find a balance between the two, still believing – just as *Zhongyong* does – that political *cheng* grows out of (or extends from) the exercise of civic *cheng*, Xunzi does not indicate any way of proceeding from civic to political sincerity, in fact treating the latter in quite instrumental manner, as "equipment" at the service of hegemony and their circles of trustees.

## 4 | POSTSCRIPT: SINCERITY AND LOYALTY (ZHONG) IN THE ESSENTIALS OF GOVERNANCE

Han dynasty Confucians did not pay particular attention to the concept of sincerity as a civic or political virtue, usually following its metaphysical exposition from the *Mean* in conjunction with its ethical understanding in *Mencius*. *Cheng* reappeared, though, in the later Confucian thought and was even embodied in the political practice of remonstrations, as exemplified by the *Essentials of Governance from the Zhenguan Reign* (*Zhenguan zhengyao*) compiled by Wu Jing (670–749). The *Essentials* is a compendium of statecraft in the form of high ministers' responses to the questions posed by Emperor Taizong of Tang (r. 626–649), who is often perceived as the greatest emperor in China's history and the paragon of the Confucian ideal of rulership. Chapter Seventeen of the *Essentials* is entitled "On Sincerity and Trustworthiness" and extensively quotes Chancellor Wei Zheng (580–643), who requested that Emperor Taizong dismiss all the sycophantic and slanderous eunuchs by "cutting this practice off at the source". His speech directly addresses the problem that was unknown to preimperial Confucianism, namely the relation between civic/political sincerity and the virtue of loyalty:

The foundation of the state necessarily depends on virtue and propriety. The sovereign should especially protect sincerity and trustworthiness. When sincerity and trustworthiness are established, then those below will not be double-minded (...) If orders are not followed through, then the orders apparently lack sincerity (...) The official fully demonstrating loyalty resides in impartiality privately and publicly and in mutual trust between superior and subordinate. When the superior has no trust, he has no way of employing the subordinate, and when the subordinate lacks trust, he has no way of serving the superior (...)

Today the pure and the muddy flow together, so that the commendable and the contemptible are not distinguished. We consider accusing others to be sincere and take those who form factions as sharing virtue. When someone has formed a faction, it means that when they speak of affairs, they cannot be trusted. Taking some to be sincerely upright means whatever they say is reliable. This is why the grace of the sovereign cannot be connected to those below, and why the loyalty of the officials cannot reach to the emperor (Wu, 2021, pp. 178, 180, 165; modified).

The first part of the passage reasserts the Confucian understanding of sincerity and reliability as virtues that guarantee the deliberate subordination and support of the people, preventing the latter from double-mindedness in the sense of either hypocritical subservience or wavering in mind. It is stressed that sincerity and trustworthiness are required equally from the governed and the governing, who have to earn the people's trust. Double-mindedness, or literally "being of two minds" (*er xin* 二心), has, however, yet another meaning: it is about the double standard of demanding impartiality from others but not from oneself and one's backers, and as a result, realizing private interests under the guise of concern for public good.

This idea introduced a novelty compared to the pre-imperial discourse on *cheng*, and was connected with the burning problem of factions (parties, *dang* 黨), as discussed in the second part of the passage. Wei Zheng goes as far as to state that whoever forms a party cannot be trusted: if eunuchs were genuinely concerned with the common good, they would not compete between each other for the recognition of the emperor and would not slander the scholars who are also worried about the condition of the state. This shows that sincerity is understood here as a *civic* and not a *political* virtue: it regards the very relation between those ruled and those who enable the former to be interested in and to contribute, in their respective way, to the realization of the common good. That is why sincerity is distinguished here from loyalty (*zhong* 忠) as a political virtue per se ("of the officials"). It is argued, however, that loyalty is a real virtue (and not just conformism or mob fealty) only when it arises from sincerity. In other words, true

loyalty is loyalty towards the values that a ruler should represent, rather than to rulers themselves. As Winnie Sung aptly observes, “a *zhong* person is someone who would offer this advice or strategic plans, even though she knows quite well that this is not something the recipient can comfortably accept. It might be easier for her to say something that is conveniently pleasing to the recipient, but a *zhong* person would choose to tell the hard truth because her concern is to advance the interest of others instead of her own” (2017, p. 183). Therefore, by affirming that loyalty should be accompanied by civic sincerity, Wei Zheng reminded the officials that they are nothing but promoted citizens, and as such they should be concerned with the common good rather than their political careers.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Classical Confucian thinkers viewed sincerity (*cheng*) as a key virtue of the governed (civic *cheng*) and the major virtue on the part of the governing (political *cheng*), arguing that both sustain the stability and efficacy of governance. The classical Confucian philosophical texts, and the *Great Learning* in particular, interpret sincerity as a virtue that encompasses all human relations, so that along with the occurrence of additional, supra-familial obligations it is transformed into specifically civic sincerity and, should one be entrusted with political power, the political *cheng*.

For Confucius and the *Zuo Commentary*, interactions between the rulers and the ruled, as well as those between equal partners of a covenant, require reliability (trustworthiness, *xin*) in the eyes of the people or other political agents, which with the rise of the conceptions of human nature became conceived as rooted in an inner sincerity. Sincerity was defined by Mencius as a part of the natural moral endowment of humans, which is oriented at the realization of the good and thereby inherently capable of influencing other people, and ultimately – at bringing order to the state. In line with Confucius' argument for rule by virtue, Mencius recognized the transforming effect of a ruler's sincerity, but he also observed that only those who first perfected their civic *cheng* are able to develop its political counterpart. For Xunzi, a ruler's sincerity is also crucial for transforming the (not-so-virtuous) people, who, after becoming reliable and sincere members of the state, constitute the basis of the stability of governance, even for a hegemon who does not realize the high moral ideals of charity and righteousness. Yet, while Xunzi believed that civic sincerity follows to a significant degree *cheng* in one's moral cultivation, he did not establish a link between civic sincerity and the political *cheng*, almost interpreting the latter as an instrumental requirement for finding trustful allies and subordinates. This approach was complemented by the Tang minister Wei Zheng, who stated that the lack of sincerity amongst the people results in their double-mindedness, meaning that some of them will realize the private interest of their political parties under the guise of concern for the public good. Therefore, true political loyalty between the officials and their sovereign is different from a conformist fealty and has to be preceded by sincerity, insofar as politicians are concerned with the common good rather than their own careers.

By showing the continuous link between moral and civic sincerity, and the reciprocal yet asymmetrical relationship between civic *cheng* and its political correlate, classical Confucian philosophers could make a valuable contribution to the contemporary discussions about civic virtues and their role in securing the stability of government, particularly in these unstable times so prone to populism.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Rawls' formulation of the concept of public legitimacy also refers to citizens' sincere beliefs (1993, p. xlvi).
- <sup>2</sup> This dialogue has in fact been already initiated, but outside the domain of academic philosophy. Ezra Pound, in his interpretation of Confucianism, viewed sincerity (*cheng*) as a key to all effective action, which in his eyes was of direct relevance to contemporary American society, (cf., Makin, 2005).
- <sup>3</sup> In quoting the classical Chinese works, I am giving the commonly recognized number of respective chapter and its section rather than page number relative to particular edition. The editions I draw on are in the references.
- <sup>4</sup> The *Analects* were ultimately compiled between 250 and 150 BC and should be read in that later context. For Shang Yang (390–338 BC) and Han Fei (280–233 BC), the fear in question becomes with time as strong as to eliminate any need for actual punishing, so that the ruler can rule “as though doing nothing” (*wuwei* 無為). Interestingly, Bao Xian (1st c. CE) and Guo Xiang (252–312 CE) in their comments on *Analects* 2:1.3 agree it is about governing in a *wuwei* fashion, but as a result of rule by virtue and not by force, (see Slingerland, 2003, p. 8. Cf. *Analects* 13:6.11).

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