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# From Divinity to Humanity: The Threefold Transformation of Ethical Thought in Pre-Qin Confucianism

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**Abstract:** By examining the evolution of pre-Qin Confucian thought on the Heaven–human relationship, and a new interpretive perspective can be applied to understanding ethical relations within pre-Qin Confucianism. In the pre-Classical period, the absence of scientific explanations for human origins shrouded these origins in mysticism, leading to practices such as totem worship, ancestor worship, and the worship of Heaven. However, through continuous exploration of the Heaven–human relationship, pre-Qin Confucians began to liberate human rights from divine authority, highlighting a profound sense of humanism. In light of this transformation, this paper aims to address three key questions: first, what distinctions did pre-Qin Confucians draw between humans and animals, and how did they emphasize individual human value? Second, how did pre-Qin Confucians transform ancestor worship through the traditions of Li and Yue? Third, how did the focus of pre-Qin Confucians shift from Heaven back to humanity? These three research areas are crucial for analyzing how the ethical relations of pre-Qin Confucianism closely integrated with political order. This exploration not only illuminates the philosophical evolution of the period but also offers a deeper understanding of how early Confucianism laid the groundwork for the interplay between personal value and societal responsibilities.

**Keywords:** pre-Qin Confucians; totem worship; ancestor worship; the relationship between Heaven and humanity; the Mandate of Heaven



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## 1. Introduction

In the tumultuous period of the pre-Qin era, Confucian scholars emerged to mitigate societal distress through political engagement. As individuals increasingly fixated on their destinies and contemporary events, pre-Qin Confucians' focus gradually shifted from the enigmatic heavens back to humanity. This paper aims to investigate the transformation in pre-Qin Confucian thought concerning the relationship between Heaven and man, transitioning from divine authority to human authority. This transformation is also evident in their exploration of self, familial, and community relationships. First, this study will analyze the shift of pre-Qin Confucians from totem worship to a clear demarcation between humans and animals, delving into the nuances of human nature and value. Second, it will elucidate how pre-Qin Confucians evolved ancestral worship from the pre-Classical era into the refined traditions of Li 禮 and Yue 樂. Finally, the paper will discuss how, after demystifying the Mandate of Heaven and the monarchy, pre-Qin Confucians began to place greater emphasis on the will of the people. Integrating the three aforementioned dimensions further illustrates how the political order of pre-Qin Confucianism is fundamentally based on its ethical relationships, thereby effectively countering the argument that no close connection exists between political order and ethical relationships in pre-Qin Confucianism.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. From Totem Worship to Human Value

In the pre-Classical period, people considered certain plants and animals as protectors, personifying them as objects of worship we now know as totems (toteng 圖騰). They

believed they shared a bloodline connection with these totems (tuteng 圖騰), gaining supernatural powers and strengthening the clan members' sense of identity.

天命玄鳥，降而生商。

According to legend, there was an ancestress of the Shang 商 named Jian Di 簡狄. While bathing by the water, she encountered an egg dropped by the divine bird (xuanniao 玄鳥). Jian Di 簡狄 swallowed the egg and subsequently gave birth to Qi 契, the ancestor of the Shang 商 dynasty. (*Shijing* 詩經•商頌•玄鳥)

This passage from *Shijing* 詩經 illustrated that in pre-Classical societies, the exploration of human origins was shrouded in mysticism, leading people to seek connections between humans and supernatural phenomena. The people of the Shang Dynasty 商朝 believed they were descendants of the divine bird (xuanniao 玄鳥). A typical example of this belief is their ancestor Qi 契, referred to as "Xuan Wang" 玄王. Additionally, bird motifs frequently appear on Shang bronze vessels, with bird-shaped ritual vessels discovered at sites such as Shijiahe 石家河 and Panlongcheng 盤龍城. This suggests that the worship of eagles and the presence of eagle-shaped ritual vessels are significant characteristics of Shang 商 culture (J. Guo 2016, p. 420), reflecting the Shang people's reverence for birds as totems.

However, by the pre-Qin period 先秦, especially during the Warring States period 戰國, the era was marked by the pain of endless wars; all Shi (士) endeavored to make the state peaceful and prosperous. There was a shift towards a greater focus on human destiny and the value of the individual. In dealing with complex political relationships, Confucians persuaded the lords to apply their theories to reconstruct the social order. They addressed affairs based on the virtue of "benevolence" (ren 仁). They believed that it is the Way (dao 道), or truth, that guides the world's operation and makes society's routine more harmonious. This also serves as the premise for pre-Qin Confucians' participation in politics.

Confucius 孔子 explicitly stated that humans are distinct from animals:

鳥獸不可與同群，吾非斯人之徒與而誰與？

Since we can't flock with birds and beasts, who else are we supposed to deal with if not other people? (*Lunyu* 論語 18.6)

As the Japanese scholar Kanaya Osamu pointed out, Confucius believed that, "human beings should not be submerged by some mysticism or natural forces, but should be regarded as independent existences" (Osamu Kanaya 1986, p. 42). Confucius' 孔子 statement removed the mystical attributes from the relationship between humans and nature, focusing more on the social attributes of humans. Biologically, humans and animals do not belong to the same species. Humans cannot be grouped with birds and animals, as mutual social interactions are essential for our survival and development. "Everyone, those people with moral aspirations, is inevitably dependent on the group for their own existence" (Zhang 2022). This shows that in the pre-Qin period, Confucius 孔子 had the advanced idea that people cannot exist independently of society, which, to some extent, aligns with Marx's notion that "the essence of man is the sum of all social relations" (Marx 1970).

Human beings' social attributes determine that they should possess a certain sense of social responsibility, Confucius 孔子 believed that since there was "no proper way in the world" (tianxia wudao 天下無道) (*Lunyu* 論語 16.2), he should join the civil service and take up the responsibility of saving society from collapse. This choice was made out of an individual's sense of responsibility towards their era and society. Under such circumstances of Confucians choosing to serve is even more aligned with practicing "the Way" (dao 道), considering it a noble act that places the fate of the people above personal gain or loss. According to Confucius 孔子, when the Shi, or scholar-gentleman, chooses to serve in a time when "the world deviating from the Way" (tianxia wudao 天下無道) (*Lunyu* 論語 16.2), it is for the purpose of "practice his normative values" (xingqiyiye 行其義也) (*Lunyu* 論語 18.7). This represents the highest realization of personal value. A hermit 隱士 has

the spirit and aspirations of being a hermit. However, the compassionate Confucian sentiment of helping others and the responsibility of saving the world should not be overlooked. This was largely reflected by Confucius 孔子. As Li Zehou 李澤厚 said, Confucius 孔子 respects the hermits 隱士 who keep themselves pure on the one hand, and on the other hand, “knows it is impossible but still does it” (zhiqi buke erweizhi 知其不可而為之) (*Lunyu* 論語 14.38). This active engagement reflects his noble liberalism, which disregards success or failure and cause and effect. “Knowing it’s impossible is a recognition, but doing it anyway” (zhiqibuke erweizhi 知其不可而為之) is “regardless of success, failure, cause, and effect, which shows that the ethical ‘essence’ is superior to the phenomenological understanding, manifests human dignity, and the freedom that does not succumb to causality” (Z. Li 2015, p. 346). Li Zehou’s discussion on phenomena and ontology posits that the phenomenal world is determined by causal relationships, where everything is measured by outcomes. In contrast, ontology transcends the understanding of the phenomenal world and is no longer constrained by causal relationships. The underlying implication is that true freedom is the liberation from worldly desires for fame and fortune. As a rational subject, overcoming these worldly desires manifests one’s dignity. From this perspective, Confucius’ 孔子 pursuit of personal value embodies this sense of freedom and dignity.

Building on Confucius’ 孔子 foundation, Mengzi 孟子 explicitly pointed out that the difference between humans and animals lies in humans’ possession of benevolence and righteousness and their adherence to moral norms.

人之所以異於禽獸者幾希，庶民去之，君子存之。舜明於庶物，察於人倫，由仁義行，非行仁義也。

The difference between humans and animals is only slight, but ordinary people discard it, while gentlemen preserve it. Shun 舜 understood all things and discerned human relationships, thus he acted according to benevolence and righteousness, not merely out of compulsion. (*Mengzi* 孟子 4B47)

Mengzi 孟子 used benevolence and righteousness to distinguish humans from animals, positioning moral attributes as the common pursuit of humanity. Compared to totem worship (tutengchongbai 圖騰崇拜), humanity has found a new direction through self-awareness. Instead of relying on mysterious forces, people can cultivate their character and transform their temperament. Mengzi 孟子 described this as the progressive levels of exhausting one’s mind (jinxin 盡心), understanding one’s nature (zhixing 知性), and knowing Heaven (zhitian 知天). Mengzi 孟子 adhered to the theory of the inherent goodness of human nature (xingshanlun 性善論), believing Heaven (tian 天) to be the source of moral and ethical goodness. Through self-cultivation, one can achieve perfect unity with Heaven (tian 天), forming a harmonious and complete cycle.

Mengzi 孟子 enriched human nature with moral and ethical values while also incorporating the need for professional fulfillment within human social attributes. Mengzi 孟子 was convinced that serving in government was the natural duty of the Shi (士), or scholar-gentlemen, arguing that this was the way for them to realize their value.

士之仕也，猶農夫之耕也，農夫豈為出疆舍其耒耜哉？

For a scholar, taking office is as important as farming is to a farmer. Would a farmer abandon his tools simply because he leaves a country? (*Mengzi* 孟子 3B8)

According to Mengzi 孟子, going out to serve as a scholar is as much of a duty as a farmer’s field cultivation. Satisfying the need for self-realization cannot be achieved without developing one’s occupation; therefore, going out to serve is a necessary way for Shi to achieve self-realization.

Compared to Confucius 孔子 and Mengzi 孟子, who proposed that humans and animals are fundamentally different, Xunzi 荀子 argued that primal human desires are similar to those of animals. He believed that human nature is inherently evil, but through the cultivation of Li and laws (lifa 禮法), this nature can be restrained, thus regulating behavior. Xunzi 荀子 begins to focus more on the practical affairs of society.

Xunzi 荀子 further combines the idea of “the hierarchical order and the law” (lifa 禮法) with the criterion of “the Way” (dao 道). Xunzi 荀子 suggested that the most important factors for a nation are land, people, the Way (Dao 道), law, and the gentleman.

無土則人不安居，無人則土不守，無道法則人不至，無君子則道不舉。故土之與人也，道之與法也者，國家之本作也。君子也者，道法之摠要也，不可少頃曠也。

Without land, people cannot settle; without people, land cannot be preserved; without correct principles and laws, people will not come to adhere; without gentlemen, correct principles cannot be implemented. Therefore, land and people, correct principles and regulations, are the foundation of the country; gentlemen, are the regulators of the right principles and laws, and cannot be absent for a moment. (Xunzi 荀子)

According to Xunzi 荀子, human rights are completely liberated from the constraints of divine authority. The diminishing influence of religion signifies a shift from value rationality to instrumental rationality.

Confucius 孔子, Mengzi 孟子, and Xunzi 荀子 all explored the essence of human nature to varying degrees. During this process, the religious indoctrination color of pre-Classical totem worship gradually faded, ultimately achieving a transformation from religious indoctrination to moral indoctrination. The essence of this shift is that it is more conducive to the rule of royal power. It is noteworthy that this process also highlights the pursuit of the intrinsic value of the individual by the pre-Qin Confucians, as evidenced by the liberalism reflected in Confucius.

### 3. From Ancestor Worship to Clan Regulation

In pre-Classical societies, people believed that the souls of their ancestors persisted and could protect their descendants. Therefore, rituals and offerings to ancestors became essential ceremonies to maintain family lineage and clan identity. This is ancestor worship. The term “ancestor worship” was coined by the renowned British philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer in 1885, referring to the ritualized invocation of deceased relatives. Its purpose lies in humanity’s attempt to understand mystical and supersensory powers (Kasi and Mathew 2019). Early Chinese ancestor worship, besides seeking to explain the origins of humanity, also aimed to secure ancestors’ protection and enhance clan identity.

The *Shijing* 詩經 contains records of how the people of the Zhou 周 dynasty believed their ancestor was Hou Ji 後稷:

厥初生民，時維薑嫫。生民如何？克禋克祀，以弗無子。履帝武敏歆，攸介攸止，載震載夙。載生載育，時維後稷。

At the very beginning, the first people were born because Jiang Yuan could bear children. How did she give birth to the first people? She prayed to the gods and sacrificed to the Heavenly Emperor, seeking to have children and avoid being childless. She stepped on the divine toe print of the Emperor, and with the blessing of the gods, she was divinely protected and fortunate. The fetus sometimes moved and sometimes was still. One day, she gave birth and diligently raised the child, who became Hou Ji of the Zhou dynasty. (*Shijing* 詩經•大雅•生民)

Unlike the Shang 商 people, who believed they were descendants of the divine bird, the Zhou 周 people considered themselves descendants of the celestial gods. The Zhou 周 people believed that Jiang Yuan 薑嫫 stepped on the footprint of the Heavenly Emperor 天帝 and, through divine intervention, conceived and gave birth to a child, who became Hou Ji 後稷, the founding ancestor of the Zhou 周 dynasty. This is a typical example of early ancestor worship in China. The people of the Zhou Dynasty 周朝 believed that their ancestor Houji 後稷 was born of divine power, linking their ancestors to the heavens and believing that their ancestors possessed sanctity. As a result, they were required to respect their ancestors and revere the mandate of heaven.

The worship of ancestors in pre-Classical times was evidenced by the ceremonial vessels unearthed at archaeological sites. For example, “the ‘handle-shaped vessel’ from the

Shijiahe 石家河 culture was essentially a ‘yuzu’ 玉祖 or ‘yuzhu’ 玉主 plaque, inscribed with the names of the ancestors’ temples, representing the names of the ancestors themselves” (J. Guo 2016, p. 517).

During this period, ancestor worship initially focused on the ancestors of the social community, particularly in the Qujialing period 屈家嶺時代. As society evolved, larger groups gradually fragmented into smaller clans during the Shijiahe period 石家河時代, and the objects of worship shifted to the ancestors of smaller families (L. Guo 2009). The significance of these rituals also transformed from a belief in the sanctity of ancestors and praying for their blessings to maintaining the kinship bonds among family members and deepening their sense of identity. This process was largely completed during the pre-Qin period 先秦.

The Zhou Dynasty 周朝 maintained the rule of the aristocratic class through a system of clan laws founded on kinship ethics. People shifted their focus from the sacred ancestor to their own ancestors, and the rituals honoring these ancestors served to strengthen this system. Zhao Guangming 趙廣明 believed that the transition of Chinese society from prehistoric to the civilized stage is mainly characterized by a moral–political order that integrates family and state based on kinship and hierarchical structures, with the tradition of rites and music as its main carrier (G. Zhao 2023). The efforts of the pre-Qin Confucians in this transformation involved replacing the mysticism of ancestral worship from the pre-Classical period with the rituals and ceremonies of the li 禮 and yue 樂 traditions. In the family, people express their respect and remembrance for their ancestors through sacrificial rites precisely for this purpose.<sup>2</sup> Confucians believe that ancestors and their descendants share a fundamental bloodline connection, and through rituals, descendants can communicate with their ancestors. The core condition for these rituals is “sincerity” (cheng 誠).

Confucius 孔子 stressed, “One should conduct the sacrificial rites as if the ancestors were present” (jiruzai 祭如在) (*Lunyu* 論語 3.12), highlighting the importance of genuine reverence during rituals, as if the ancestors were still alive.

Mengzi 孟子 also proposed that “daily provision was not enough to express the highest filial piety; only in dealing with funerals and sacrifices could the greatest filial piety be demonstrated” (yangshengzhe buzuyi dangdashi weisongsizhe keyi dangdashi 養生者不足以當大事惟送死可以當大事) (*Mengzi* 孟子 4B41). This showed Mengzi’s 孟子 emphasis on rituals and propriety, indicating that sacrifices are not merely about respecting and remembering the deceased but also about embodying propriety and morality.

Xunzi 荀子 also stated, “The gentleman uses it as a means of culture, while the common people view it as a means to serve the spirits” (gjunzi yiweiwen erbaixing yiweishen 故君子以為文而百姓以為神) (*Xunzi* 荀子 17.13). This showed that Xunzi 荀子 regarded ritual sacrifices as a cultural means to maintain social morality. During the Song and Ming 宋明 dynasties, Neo-Confucian scholars 理學家 further elaborated on the significance of ancestor worship from the perspective of qi 氣 cosmology and clarified the criteria for selecting objects of worship. Xie Liangzuo’s 謝良佐 classification of ghosts and deities into “those to be worshipped” (kezhe 可者) and “those not to be worshipped” (bukezhe 不可者):

可者使人格之，不使人致死之。不可者使人遠之，不使人致生之。

“Those to be worshipped” (kezhe 可者) include ancestors and parents, who should be sincerely honored rather than merely seen as deceased individuals. “Those not to be worshipped” (bukezhe 不可者), such as idle deities and wild ghosts, should be respected from a distance (jingeryuanzhi 敬而遠之) and not treated as living beings. (Zhen 2019, p. 328)

Overall, his attitude towards “those to be worshipped” (kezhe 可者) embodied a humanistic spirit, while his view towards “those not to be worshipped” (bukezhe 不可者) aligns with Confucius’ 孔子 principle: “Worshipping spirits that should not be worshipped is a form of flattery” (feiqigui erjizhi chanye 非其鬼而祭之 諂也) (*Lunyu* 論語 2.24).



Confucian attitudes toward ancestor worship demonstrate a deep respect for blood-line heritage. The Confucian concept of family encompasses not only a horizontal lineage but also a vertical intergenerational relationship. This vertical relationship is sustained through rituals that emphasize reverence for ancestors and ensure the transmission of family spirit and culture. The sacrificial concepts in pre-Qin Confucianism are fundamentally grounded in kinship ethics. The purpose of these rituals was not merely to seek blessings or avert disasters but to deepen familial ethical relations and uphold the Way of Kings (wangdao 王道).<sup>3</sup> As Zhao Fasheng 趙法生 said, “The Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) represents the source of value and belongs to religious ethics, while some spirits in folk beliefs lack ethical attributes and are purely for seeking blessings and avoiding disasters. Thus, Confucians, who always prioritize morality, do not value them” (F. Zhao 2022). Therefore, the pre-Qin Confucian theory of the political value of the family at the family level is also vertically deepened. In a sense, the hereditary system (shixizhi 世襲制) is a clear manifestation of this, as the Zhou Gong 周公 insisted on the system of primogeniture (dizhangzijichengzhi 嫡長子繼承制) to uphold this principle. Given the Confucian emphasis on vertical family relationships, one might wonder how the abdication system (禪讓制) of government can be explained. This involves the relationship between the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) and the Way of Kings (wangdao 王道), which will be detailed in the fourth section.

The pre-Qin Confucians’ emphasis on clan ethics is reflected vertically in the respect and reverence for ancestors and horizontally in the extension of clan ethics into the political realm. Regarding the relationship between clan and society, in the case of pre-Qin Confucians, there was a relationship between filial piety and benevolence. In this regard, there are two distinctive positions in the academic world: Tian Feng 田豐 held the viewpoint of “benevolence and filial piety” (renxiao erben 仁孝二本) and proposed that “the different development of benevolence and filial piety in the vertical and horizontal directions is an indissoluble dimension of life, and the consistent way is to maintain the tension between the two and not to dissolve the heterogeneity of the two at the expense of the two” (F. Tian 2020). On the other hand, Zhao Jingang 趙金剛 believed that the contradiction between the universality of benevolence and the specificity of filial piety has been overexpanded in modern society and proposes that kinship is the specificity of love, and compassion is the universality of love. He ultimately concluded that “benevolence and filial piety are the same in the structure of the unity of all living beings, and they are consistent in Confucianism” (J. Zhao 2023). Therefore, officials must maintain political fairness on the one hand and focus on familialism based on kinship ethics. Balancing the relationship between family and politics is vital for officials.

Because the pre-Qin Confucians lived under a patriarchal system, there were no clear rules for handling affairs in the public and private spheres. When matters in the public sphere involved private feelings, Confucius 孔子 proposed that “qinqin xiangyin” 親親相隱.

葉公語孔子曰：吾黨有直躬者，其父攘羊，而子證之。孔子曰：吾黨之直者異於是：父為子隱，子為父隱——一直在其中矣。

Ye Gong told Confucius 孔子, “In my region, there is an honest and upright man; when his father stole a sheep, he reported it”. Confucius 孔子 said, “The honest and upright people in our place are different from yours, a father conceals for his son, and a son conceals for his father—uprightness lies within this. (*Lunyu* 論語 13.18)

Ye Gong 葉公 referred to an “upright” person as one who, in a case where a son reports his father for stealing a sheep, demonstrates uprightness. However, Confucius 孔子 defined “uprightness” as mutual concealment between father and son.

Here, we can refer to Paul D’Ambrosio’s summary of contemporary scholars’ different interpretations of this text:

Liu [Qingping] believes that this kind of attitude fosters corruption in modern China, and desires to “purge” Confucianism of this “practical evil” [...] according to May Sim, the son acts for his father’s good, which, in turn, becomes the good of society. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont explain that this theft can be dealt within the family, so there is no need for the son to report anything to the authorities. Bryan Van Norden argues that this case is an exception because Confucians generally look down on falsity as it might begin to spread to other parts of one’s life. These interpreters all share the view that deception is basically bad, but excusable in this case because it can bring about some good. [...] In effect they are employing a type of consequentialist reading of falsity in the Confucian tradition. (D’Ambrosio 2015, pp. 138–39)

These scholars all believe that the act of deception mentioned by Confucius 孔子 is wrong because it violates moral principles. However, they are actually employing a consequentialist approach to interpreting the concepts within the Confucian tradition, which constitutes a misreading of Confucian kinship ethics. From the perspective of the public domain and the political level, stealing someone else’s property is considered unacceptable by both moral and legal standards. However, in the private domain of family relationships, Confucianism holds that the act of a son reporting his father violates natural human relations. In this context, true straightforwardness was observed in maintaining familial bonds and concealing each other’s faults. In *Liji* (禮記), there is a clear distinction between serving one’s parents and serving one’s sovereign:

事親有隱而無犯……事君有犯而無隱。

When serving one’s elders, one may conceal their faults but must not be offensive; when serving one’s sovereign, even at the risk of offense, one must offer advice unreservedly. (*Liji* 禮記•檀弓上)

The relationship between a father and son is grounded in blood ties; even if the father is guilty, the son cannot disclose his father’s guilt to others. Moreover, there is a difference in the relationships between a ruler and the Shi 士 to normative values, and the nature of the relationship between a father and son. Therefore, if the monarch errs, the subjects should have the courage to counsel and highlight these mistakes. According to Tan Ankui 譚安奎, the so-called “relatives harboring each other” (qinqin xiangyin 親親相隱) in Confucianism can be seen as the manifestation of the political and ethical potential of the family in traditional Chinese culture: “In Chinese tradition, relatives hiding from each other is put forward as a kind of ethical obligation, which is an attempt of family ethics to circumvent or override the external political and legal order, and it is a manifestation of the attempt to put ‘family ethics’ into practice. Manifestation results from an attempt to extend ‘kinship’ (qinqin 親親) directly into the political realm” (A. Tan 2022). China’s current “*Criminal Procedure Law*” still includes provisions allowing close relatives such as the defendant’s spouse, parents, and children to choose not to testify in court, which reflects the absorption of Confucius’ 孔子 idea of “relatives harboring each other” (qinqin xiangyin 親親相隱).

Mengzi 孟子 discussed the relationship between familial devotion and universal justice, centering on Shun 舜. Although Shun 舜 was the ruler of the world, his unhappiness stemmed from him missing his parents. According to Mengzi 孟子, Shun 舜 was a prime example of a sage. The joy of a sage is distinct from the pleasures sought by the masses; sages do not delight in the wealth, status, or power pursued by others, but are instead concerned with failing to comply with their parents’ wishes. This illustrates Mengzi’s 孟子 belief that the essence of a sage’s fulfillment resides in prioritizing the family. Subsequently, in Shun’s 舜 treatment of his brother, Xiang 象, one can discern the sage’s flexibility in handling public and private matters. Xiang 象 wanted to murder Shun 舜, but after Shun 舜 became sovereign, he punished unkind individuals such as Gonggong 共公, Huan Dou 驩兜, San Miao 三苗, and Gun 鯀, and assigned Xiang 象 to Youbi 有庖. Mengzi 孟子 viewed this as the way a benevolent person treats his brother, that is, without resentment or anger and with closeness and love. Shun’s 舜 assignment of Xiang 象 to Youbi 有庖 and

sending officials to govern the area were essentially forms of exile for Xiang 象. Liang Tao 梁濤 believed that the discussion in this chapter indicates that “Mengzi 孟子 is concerned with social justice but is unwilling to abandon kinship affections; his attitude is one of compromise and reconciliation” (Liang 2010, p. 242). As a monarch, Shun 舜 should just have been punishing the unkind: while Xiang’s 象 previous misdeeds certainly warranted punishment, Shun could not deal with his brother as he did with others like Gonggong 共工 due to their blood relationship. Therefore, Shun 舜 adopted a middle approach, granting Xiang 象 a fiefdom while imposing regulatory controls. This shows that Mengzi 孟子 believed that a gentleman should indeed adhere to fairness in politics, but when the subjects of fairness involve family and ethical relationships, consideration should be given to blood ties and adjustments should be made accordingly. Mengzi 孟子 emphasized that no matter what position one holds, one should always honor one’s relatives, and even if Shun 舜 is in the position of monarch, he should still treat his father with caution and respect. In summary, in Mengzi’s 孟子 view, the person in an office career should pay attention to family blood relationships. Mengzi 孟子 believed that prioritizing family is a key aspect of a sage’s fulfillment of their nature (jinxing 盡性).

As Wang Lin 王林 and Zhang Fangyu 張方玉 have stated “Compared with Confucius 孔子 and Mengzi 孟子, Xunzi 荀子, more than his predecessors, has elaborated in a focused, complete and systematic manner the ethical relationships within the family, and has established the norms of propriety that should be observed by fathers and sons, brothers and husbands and wives” (Wang and Zhang 2008). When King Wu 武王 died and King Cheng 成王 was young, Zhou Gong 周公 acted as regent and returned power to King Cheng 成王 after seven years. According to Xunzi 荀子, Zhou Gong’s 周公 regency and return of the throne adhered to the rules of etiquette and moderation. His replacement of the first-born son as regent, in the capacity of a collateral branch, aimed to preserve the dynasty’s administration and world peace. Returning the throne to King Cheng 成王 upheld and complied with the system of succession by the first-born son (嫡长子继承制). Compared to the emphasis on kinship and affection, Xunzi 荀子 placed greater importance on clan order. He integrated the hierarchical order and the law with clan order, which aligns with his broader philosophy that emphasizes the hierarchical order (li 禮), the law, benevolence (ren 仁), and normative values (yi 義).

As Li Youguang 李友廣 said, “Confucianism combines politics with ethics and moral considerations, ethically treating politics. This naturally relates to its emphasis on the ethics of clan and family life, as well as the sense of order, intimacy, and unparalleled trust that arises from it” (Y. Li 2019). In summary, the pre-Qin Confucians transformed the ancestral worship of the pre-Classical period by integrating the traditions of Li 禮 and Yue 樂 with family ethics. From a vertical perspective, the pre-Qin Confucians expressed their remembrance of ancestors through rituals such as sacrifices, thereby deepening clan members’ sense of identity and cultural belonging. From a horizontal perspective, they also addressed the interwoven affairs of public and private domains by combining rituals with ethical relationships, such as the practice of mutual concealment among kin (qinqinxiangyin 親親相隱), the rites of filial piety and brotherly respect (xiaotizhili 孝悌之禮), and the system of primogeniture (dizhangzichengzhi 嫡長子繼承制). Thus, it is evident that the pre-Qin Confucians’ emphasis on consanguineous ethics ultimately aimed to ensure the reliability of political governance.

#### 4. From the Mandate of Heaven to the Will of the People

Regarding collective will, the political value theory of pre-Qin Confucianism primarily revolves around the relationship between Heaven (tian 天) and humanity. As the authority of Heaven (tian 天) and the ruler began to wane, pre-Qin Confucianism started to recognize the subjectivity of humans. This shift heightened the awareness of the importance of collective will, highlighting a significant evolution in Confucian political thought.

Philip J. Ivanhoe argued that early Confucians did not believe in a creator deity or an anthropomorphic god separate from the natural order. However, they based their ethical



claims on the authority of Heaven (tian 天), believing that Heaven grants moral nature to humans and that the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) exists (Ivanhoe 2007, p. 211).

In pre-Classical times, numerous objects of worship are recognized, with the highest status attributed to “Heaven” (tian 天). Here, “Heaven” (tian 天) does not refer to the natural sky but rather to a personified deity. It is believed that people act according to Heaven’s will (tianyi 天意), as recorded in the *Shangshu*: “naimingxihe qinruohaotian” (乃命羲和, 钦若昊天) (*Shangshu* 尚書•虞書•堯典). The divine right of kings is also emphasized, as illustrated by the *Shijing*: “wenwangzaishang yuzhaoyutian” (文王在上 於昭於天) (*Shijing* 詩經•大雅•文王), which indicates that Wen Wang 文王 is considered to be born of divine mandate. While worshipping Heaven, it is believed that through rituals, wishes align with its will. An example from the *Shijing*: “pengpengyupu xinzhियouzhi” (芄芃械朴 薪之標之) (*Shijing* 詩經•大雅•棫樸), referring to the practice of cutting down trees and using the firewood for offerings to deities.

By the Pre-Qin period, Confucius 孔子 believed that Heaven (tian 天) has both natural significance and the significance of being the ultimate ruler. In this sense, Confucius 孔子 seemed to have a tendency to personify Heaven with divine attributes. However, the concept of tian in Confucius’ 孔子 philosophy is not limited to these two meanings. The notion of tian also begins to show a budding sense of moral consciousness. He proposed the idea that “Heaven endows me with virtue” (tianshengdeyuyu 天生德於予) (*Lunyu* 論語 7.23), indicating that he saw Heaven (tian 天) as the source of human moral and ethical values. Confucius 孔子 had a profound reverence for Heaven (tian 天), as seen in his assertion that “a gentleman should revere the Mandate of Heaven, those in power, and the words of the sages” (junziyouanwei weitianming weidaren weishengrenzhiyan 君子有三畏 畏天命 畏大人 畏聖人之言) (*Lunyu* 論語 16.8). This implied that Confucius 孔子 placed the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) on the same level of authority as that of rulers and sages. In Confucius’ 孔子 discourse, these three held absolute authority and were considered unchallengeable. Therefore, in the face of such absolute authority, individuals could only accept the inevitability brought by this authority, which is reflected in the idea of “knowing that adversity and prosperity are both predestined” (zhiqiongzhियouming zhitongzhियoushi 知窮之有命 知通之有時) (*Zhuangzi* 莊子, see Waipian, Qiushui 9).

Confucius 孔子 lamented the unclear social environment of his time, saying, “The phoenix does not come anymore, and the Yellow River has not produced its diagrams. My life is probably over” (fengniaobuzhi hebuchutu wuyiyifu 鳳鳥不至 河不出圖 吾已矣夫) (*Lunyu* 論語 9.9). The phoenix, an ancient mythical bird symbolizing auspiciousness, signifies peace in the world when it appears. It is said that the diagrams appeared in the Yellow River 黃河 only when a sage 聖人 received the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命). Confucius 孔子 used these legendary signs of auspiciousness to measure the peace of the world, reflecting his reverence for the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命).

Mengzi 孟子, however, improved upon this notion by attributing the role of collective consciousness to the realm of inevitability. Thus, heaven (tian 天) no longer remained an unfathomable mystery. Mengzi 孟子 believed that the actions and moral efforts of individuals and the collective could align with and influence the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命), making it less mysterious and more comprehensible.

When discussing the abdication system of Yao 堯, Shun 舜, and Yu 禹, Mengzi 孟子 stated:

天與賢，則與賢；天與子，則與子。

If “Heaven” (tian 天) wants to give the world to a virtuous man, it will give it to a virtuous man; if “Heaven” (tian 天) wants to give the world to the ruler’s son, it will give it to the ruler’s son. (*Mengzi* 孟子 5A6).

In Mengzi’s 孟子 philosophy, “Heaven” (tian 天) as a source of morality is seen not as a transcendent deity or cultural accessory, but as a tradition embodying social and cultural values. This tradition is historically grounded, internalized, and evolves with humanity, representing the highest ethical standards rather than merely biological or public opinion

forces (Turner 2023). Referring to the above discussion, Mengzi's 孟子 concept of "Heaven" (tian 天) here should be understood as the moral heaven, which signifies the highest ethical value standards. On this basis, Mengzi 孟子 discussed the relationship between the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) and the will of the common people (minyi 民意), arguing that government employees should follow the Mandate of Heaven and pay attention to the will of the common people. The mandate of "Heaven" (tian 天) does not depend on the will of individuals and is full of contingencies. At the same time, it changes according to the will of the common people as a whole. The monarch receives the mandate of "Heaven" (tian 天) when he garners the support of the people, it can be said that the inevitability of the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) derives from the will of the people. A more accurate understanding of Mengzi's 孟子 interpretation of "tian" can be referenced from the viewpoint of Behuniak, who explains "Heaven" (tian 天) as "the spirit of the age" or the "collective will of society" (Behuniak 2019, p. 216). Thus, Mengzi emphasizes the importance of the will of the common people by moralizing the concept of "Heaven" (tian 天). Liang Tao 梁濤 pointed out, "Whether through abdication or hereditary succession, it is merely a superficial formality and not the primary focus. What truly matters is the practice of the kingly way and benevolent governance, gaining the support of the people of the world" (Liang 2010, p. 251). In summary, Mengzi 孟子 certainly values the principles of filial piety and brotherly love (xiaotizhidao 孝悌之道). However, when addressing collective affairs, he also emphasizes the importance of collective will. This concept of jing-quan (經權) reflects the Confucian consideration of the abdication system and hereditary succession, as discussed in the third section, where the key issue is whether the ruler can practice the Way of Kings (xingwangdao 行王道) and implement benevolent governance (shirenzheng 施仁政). Therefore, starting with Mengzi 孟子, when people faced the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命), they no longer had to passively accept it as mere chance. Instead, they could actively gain the support of the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) through their subjective initiative on a level of inevitability. Unlike earlier times when people were at a loss in the face of a religiously significant "Heaven" (tian 天), humans began to explore the significant impact of individual moral consciousness. A ruler with exceptionally high moral cultivation would inevitably implement policies for the benefit of the community, thereby naturally gaining the approval of its members. In this way, the individual derives the confidence to confront chance from the collective.

Compared to Confucius 孔子 and Mengzi 孟子, Xunzi 荀子 made a significant advance in the relationship between Heaven and humans by proposing "tian ren zhi fen" (天人之分). Hao Yingting pointed out, "Hutton translated 'tian ren zhi fen' (天人之分) as the respective allotments of Heaven and humankind (Hutton 2014, p. 175), indicating that he is aware that fen 分 not only refers to the difference between the natural domain of Heaven and the artificial domain of humanity but also suggests that Heaven and humanity have distinct allotments and roles" (Hao 2024). Xunzi 荀子 regarded Heaven (tian 天) as the natural Heaven and saw the "Mandate of Heaven" (tianming 天命) as a natural law that is not subject to anyone's will. However, he did not believe that humans are powerless in the face of this mandate. On the contrary, Xunzi 荀子 further proposed that we should "control the Mandate of Heaven and utilize it" (zhitianming eryongzhi 制天命而用之). In Xunzi's 荀子 view, the early Confucian mystical interpretation of Heaven (tian 天) began to weaken, and its scientific nature began to strengthen. People's attention started to shift from Heaven (tian 天) back to humans themselves, and there was a significant increase in the emphasis on human initiative.

Mengzi 孟子 advocated for the Way of the King (wangdao 王道) and asserted that the will of the people represents the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命), thereby emphasizing collective will. Xunzi 荀子, however, proposed a more nuanced approach. He argued that officials should pay attention to the collective will but should not act independently of the group. Furthermore, he maintained that they should not pursue personal wealth while neglecting the collective.

古之所謂仕士者，厚敦者也，合群者也，樂富貴者也，樂分施者也，遠罪過者也，務事理者也，羞獨富者也。

The Shi spoken of in ancient times were those who were sincere and kind-hearted, who integrated well with the people, who found joy in wealth and rank, who were willing to share their wealth, who stayed clear of wrongdoing, who handled affairs by reason and justice, and who felt ashamed of being wealthy alone. (Xunzi 荀子 6.12)

On the basis of Mengzi's 孟子 emphasis on "the will of the people" (minyì 民意), Xunzi 荀子 further emphasized the importance of collective prosperity. He regarded this as a crucial hallmark of political participants, specifically Shi (士). Xunzi 荀子 believed that Shi should not only possess sincere and upright qualities but also adhere to propriety and regulations. They should have a strong sense of collective consciousness, prioritize the group, and nurture a compassionate concern for the world, while being charitable and benevolent.

In general, from Confucius' 孔子 reverence for the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命) to Mengzi's 孟子 proposal that the people's will constitutes the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命), and finally to Xunzi's 荀子 idea of "controlling and utilizing the Mandate of Heaven" (zhitianming eryongzhi 制天命而用之), it is evident that the focus of pre-Qin Confucianism gradually shifted from the divine to humanity itself. Li Feng believes that early Confucians, starting from Confucius 孔子, closely linked the manner and meaning of human existence to humanity itself, rather than to external divine mandates (F. Li 2023).<sup>4</sup> However, this was not entirely the case. While pre-Qin Confucians indeed made efforts in this direction, it was only with Xunzi 荀子 that a qualitative leap in this process occurred. Humanism began to emerge, breaking free from the shackles of religious doctrine. Pre-Qin Confucianism not only advanced in exploring the relationship between Heaven (tian 天) and humanity but also in understanding the relationship between individuals and society, particularly the dynamic between individuals and the collective. From Confucius' 孔子 political ideal of saving the common people to Mengzi's 孟子 emphasis on public opinion and advocacy for benevolent governance and finally to Xunzi's 荀子 further emphasis on the importance of the people, it is clear that pre-Qin Confucianism, while awakening personal consciousness, also gradually recognized the importance of the collective will. The monarch's will no longer overshadows the collective will. Driven by this shift, pre-Qin Confucian scholars achieved a dual realization of personal value and social responsibility, resulting in a win-win situation for both individuals and society.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, this article analyzes how ethical relationships manifest within the political order of pre-Qin Confucianism by examining the shift in thought from deification to humanization. This analysis seeks to address the initial questions: First, what distinguishes humans from animals according to pre-Qin Confucians, and how do they highlight individual human value? Second, how did pre-Qin Confucians transform ancestral worship through the tradition of Li 禮 and Yue 樂? Third, how did the focus of pre-Qin Confucians shift from Heaven back to humanity? The research findings are as follows:

1. Pre-Qin Confucians differentiated humans from animals through social and ethical lenses. This distinction demystifies totem worship 圖騰崇拜 and underscores the essence of humanity. They proposed that individuals can enrich and refine their nature through moral education, ultimately leading to the pursuit of personal freedom and dignity.
2. Pre-Qin Confucians removed the mysticism from ancestral worship and transformed it through the traditions of Li 禮 and Yue 樂. Vertically, they expressed respect and remembrance for ancestors through sacrificial rites, while horizontally, they emphasized familial bonds through rituals of kinship and filial piety. This integration of Li

禮 and Yue 樂 with ethical relations aimed to strengthen the importance of bloodline ethics to consolidate political stability.

3. As pre-Qin Confucians continued to explore the relationship between Heaven and man, their political ideals evolved accordingly. They demystified Heaven and the ruler, shifting their focus back to humanity, emphasizing the relationships between individuals and the community, and stressing the importance of collective will.

The development of pre-Qin Confucian thought on the relationship between Heaven and man is characterized by a diminishing religious hue, reflecting the transition from divine authority to value rationality and instrumental rationality. It is noteworthy that as pre-Qin Confucians gradually liberated human rights from divine authority, humanism began to emerge. Their basic moral and ethical norms and value pursuits became closely intertwined with the political order. On one hand, kinship provides strong support for the structure of political order; on the other hand, the structure of political order deepens the sense of identity in kinship and emphasizes the importance of ethical relationships.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Loubna El Amine (2015) argued that Confucian political order focuses on maintaining security, stability, and prosperity, rather than prioritizing the interests of the people, suggesting that Confucian politics is not rooted in ethical considerations. In contrast, Jin Yutang disputed this claim, contending that it contradicts the Confucian emphasis on universal humanity, the welfare of the people, and the coherence of Confucian thought (See Jin 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Since ritual is an important means of communicating the relationship between humans and deities and is the source of legitimacy for secular power and political order, patriarchs often use the power of sacrificial ceremonies to strengthen their control over the family (See Liang 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> Cao Jiandun pointed out that the ritual system of ancestor worship encompasses faith, ethical, and political attributes, thereby maintaining political power and ideology. By fostering shared beliefs and rituals, it strengthens familial ties and promotes cultural and political identity among social members (See Cao 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Li Feng agreed with B. Wang’s view that, “Confucius’ 孔子 proposal of ‘the root of ritual’ (lizhiben 禮之本) signifies a shift in the understanding of ‘humans’ from a focus on heavenly principles to an emphasis on the internal aspects of human life” (see B. Wang 2001, p. 68).

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