

Article

Academic Discourse of Chinese Philosophy and 21st Century China Studies—The Case of Confucian Views on War of Revenge

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Abstract: Concomitant to the rise of China is an increasing interest in Chinese philosophy. Some scholars have focused on Confucian views on international order and war to interpret or predict Chinese foreign policies. Regarding Chinese military culture, due attention has been paid to Confucian just war theory. However, the topic of retributive war remains little studied. A few works have been published on this topic. They tend to concentrate on exceptional and controversial cases, arguing that Confucianism zealously advocates war of revenge. This paper argues that although Confucianism approves blood vengeance, it does not approve of war as a means of revenge. The attribution of extreme punishment theory of just cause to Confucianism without adequate evidence might alert us of the changing roles of Chinese philosophy in the intellectual and political arenas today.

Keywords: Confucianism, just war theory, war of revenge, China studies

Introduction

Following the rise of China, the 21st century witnessed an increasing scholarly interest in Chinese philosophy. As China plays a more significant role in international affairs regarding economic and military engagement, the task of interpreting and predicting Chinese foreign policies becomes more important.¹ To perform the task, an analysis of realpolitik is no

¹ See Alan Hunter, "Soft Power: China on the Global stage," in *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2, no. 3 (2009); Horst J. Helle, *China: Promise or Threat?: A Comparison of*

doubt necessary. As China is also a country with an ancient civilization, many scholars believe it is equally necessary to examine Chinese culture, especially traditional Chinese views on world order and war.² Scholars of China studies, therefore, draw on classical Chinese philosophy (mainly Confucianism) to hypothesize the moral norms that might dictate Chinese foreign policies and military decisions. This, intriguingly, drives the study of classical Chinese philosophy to the frontline of the study of international relations.³

As the narrative of “Thucydides Trap” was construed and is gaining currency, how Chinese philosophy would answer the question of when and how to fight a war becomes especially relevant.⁴ Many academic works have been published on Confucian just war theory or Confucian wartime morality.⁵ They speculate on what moral grounds China would consider sending troops to another country justified or what moral codes would constrain China’s use of force. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to Confucian views on retributive war or war of revenge,⁶ a topic that speaks directly to the unceasing worry that underlies the Western narrative

Culture (Brill, 2017). See also, Evan Osnos, “Making China Great Again,” in *The New Yorker*, 8 (2018).

² See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, Vol. 178 (New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press, 1998); Daniel A. Bell, “War, Peace, and China’s Soft Power: A Confucian Approach,” in *Diogenes*, 56, no. 1 (2009), 26-40; and Robin McNeal, *Conquer and Govern: Early Chinese Military Texts from the Yi Zhou Shu* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

³ A notable example is the emergence of “Chinese school of international relations” or a “theory of international relations with Chinese characteristics”, whose most representative work is Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia de dangdaixing: shijie zhixu de shijian he xiangxiang* [A Possible World of All-under-the-Heaven System: The World Order in the Past and for the Future] (Beijing: Zhongxin, 2016). For more discussions, see Bettina Hüchel, “Theory of International Relations with Chinese characteristics,” in *Gesellschafts-und geisteswissenschaftliche interventionen* (2013), 34-64; Ge Zhaoguang, “Dui ‘Tianxia’ de Xiangxiang” [An Imagination about “all under Heaven,” in *Sixiang* 29 (2015), 13-34; and Salvatore Babones, “Taking China Seriously: Rationality, Tianxia, and the ‘Chinese School’ of International Relations,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.602>>.

⁴ See Graham Allison, “The Thucydides Trap: are the US and China Headed for War?,” in *The Atlantic*, 24, no. 9 (2015) and Helle, *China: Promise or Threat?*

⁵ See Johnston, *Cultural Realism*; Xinzhong Yao, “Conflict, Peace and Ethical Solutions: A Confucian Perspective on War,” in *Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2004), 89-111; Bell, “War, Peace, and China’s Soft Power;” Sumner B. Twiss and Jonathan Chan, “The Classical Confucian Position on the Legitimate Use of Military Force,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 40, no. 3 (2012), 447-472; McNeal, *Conquer and Govern*; Ping-cheung Lo, “Chinese Traditions on Military Ethics,” *Johnson, JT, Patterson, ED, The Ashgate Research Companion to Military Ethics* (2015), 399-414.

⁶ Morality of revenge is a marginalized topic in the study of Confucianism and the field of Chinese philosophy in general. The most comprehensive and detailed study, to my knowledge, remains Longxian Li, *Fuchou Guan de Shengcha yu Quanshi* (An Examination and Interpretation of the Views on Revenge: from Pre-Qin through Han and Weijin to the Tang Period) (Taipei: Taida chuban zhongxin, 2012).

of China as a “threat” or the narrative of “Thucydides Trap.”⁷ Prevalent in such narratives is the narrative of China’s “century of humiliation” or victimhood nationalism.⁸ It typically depicts China as conceiving of itself and living with resentment as a victim of colonialism and imperialism.⁹ A repetition of such a depiction *insinuates* that once China becomes a superpower, it will *probably* seek revenge. So far, little study has been done on whether traditional Chinese thought, or Confucianism, would consider retributive war justified. Yet, intriguingly, the existing academic discourses on the topic tend to resonate with Western concerns; they selectively concentrate on a few eye-catching yet protean accounts from a Confucian text and argue that Confucianism zealously advocates war of revenge against other “countries.”¹⁰

The current article is a preliminary attempt to present this intriguing phenomenon, illustrating how some scholars infer Confucian advocacy of war of revenge from its advocacy of blood vengeance. It first reconstructs the Confucian argument for *blood vengeance*. Next, it presents academic discourses that portray Confucianism as a philosophy that endorses *war of revenge*. Finally, it argues that Confucianism does not approve of war of revenge. The Confucian argument supports vengeance for direct-blood relatives on the level of individuals (in situations where there is no political authority to minister justice). However, it does not support that war is a justified means of revenge and that a polity (the sovereignty and the people collectively) can be an agent of revenge.

1. Confucian Arguments for Blood Vengeance

Some Confucian classics express explicit advocacy (sometimes even glorification) of blood vengeance.¹¹ In the discussion of the Confucian perspective on vengeance, the *Gongyang Commentary* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳) on the classic *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) and the *Book of*

⁷ Denny. Roy, “The ‘China Threat’ Issue: Major Arguments,” *Asian Survey* 36.8 (1996): 758-771. See Allison, “The Thucydides Trap.”

⁸ He, Yanan, “History, Chinese Nationalism and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 16.50 (2007): 1-24. See Hilton Yip, “China Doesn’t Have to Keep Playing the Victim” <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/27/china-doesnt-have-to-keep-playing-the-victim-huawei-canada-sweden-meng/>> (accessed September 22, 2021).

⁹ This does not suggest that the victimhood narrative is not popular in China in Chinese language discourses. It is tempting to examine the Chinese root of it and how it circulates in Chinese context, but the topic is beyond the scope of the current paper.

¹⁰ Jiang Qing, *Gongyang xue yinlun* 公羊學引論 (An Introduction to Gongyang Tradition) (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995). See Kam-por Yu, “Confucian Views on War as Seen in the Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals,” in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 9, no. 1 (2010), 97-111.

¹¹ Li, *Fuchou Guan de Shengcha yu Quanshi*, 9-10.

Rites (*Liji* 禮記) are most frequently cited because they explicitly advocate blood vengeance. Their main argument is derived from Confucian ethics, which has *ren* 仁 (often rendered as “kindness” or “benevolence”) as the core value.¹² This *ren*-centered ethics promotes the universality of natural sympathy and humanity, but it also prioritizes the gradation of love because the ethical theory is built upon the thesis that filial piety (*xiao* 孝) is the most primitive moral feeling. According to the thesis, filial piety is the foundation of human morality: one’s attachment and moral feelings toward one’s parents enable one to extend the feeling (e.g., empathy) toward others. Therefore, Confucian moral theory holds that one has moral obligations toward all members of society, yet one’s obligation should be proportional regarding one’s relationship with others.¹³

Considering filial piety as the most natural moral emotion and the foundation of morality, Confucianism also considers blood vengeance morally acceptable (when certain requirements are met). The *Gongyang Commentary* and the *Book of Rites* state respectively:

If a ruler is assassinated, and his ministers fail to punish the murderer, then they are not ministers, just as a son failing to avenge his father is no son.¹⁴

Zixia asked Confucius, saying, “How should (a son) conduct himself regarding the man who has killed his father or mother?” The Master said, “He should sleep on straw, with his shield for a pillow; he should not take office; he must be determined not to live with the slayer under the same Heaven. If he meets with him in the

¹² Scholars have specified that the *Gongyang Commentary* and the *Book of Rites* approve of blood vengeance, but the actual arguments—the argument for blood vengeance and the argument for including warfare as a form of blood vengeance—remain unexplored. Luís Cordeiro Rodrigues and I have made an initial attempt elsewhere to reconstruct the Confucian argument for blood vengeance and indicated some historical narratives about wars launched in the name of blood vengeance. This study will not repeat the details of our reconstruction; it will only summarize and explain how the Confucian argument for blood vengeance would be applied to retributive war. See Luis Cordeiro-Rodrigues and Ting-mien Lee, “The Morality of Vengeance: Confucianism and Tutuism in Dialogue” (Under review).

¹³ See Li Chenyang, “Shifting Perspectives: Filial Morality Revisited,” in *Philosophy East and West*, 47, no. 2 (1997), 211–232 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1399875>>; Yong Huang, “Why You Ought Not to Turn the Other Cheek: Confucius on How to Deal With Wrongdoers,” in *National Central University Journal of Humanities*, 55, no. 1 (2013), 1–40; David Wong, “Chinese Ethics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/ethics-chinese>>.

¹⁴ Harry Miller, *The Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals: A Full Translation* (Springer, 2015), 26.

marketplace or the court, he should not have to go back for his weapon but (instantly) fight with him.”¹⁵

Gongyang’s stories and the *Book of Rites*, a son cannot be qualified to be a son if he fails to avenge his father. He must sacrifice his comfortable life and determine to eradicate the perpetrator. He should not prioritize his safety when he must fight.

However, not every act of retaliation for direct-blood relatives’ injury or death is morally justified. For an act of revenge to be justified, it should meet some restriction requirements. For example, a son has the moral duty to avenge his parent only if the parent was wrongfully harmed or murdered, and there is no institutionalized justice enforcement.

If the father is wrongfully executed, then it is quite permissible for the son to avenge him; if the father is rightfully executed, and the son chooses to avenge him, then he is starting down the path of endless vengeance and counter-vengeance.¹⁶

Assuming there was an enlightened Son of Heaven, would Duke Xiang have been able to act as he did? The answer is no. How, then, are his actions justified? With no Son of Heaven above or leader of states rulers below, one is subject only to the pleasure and pain of his ancestors.¹⁷

According to the fragments from the *Gongyang Commentary*, an act of revenge is permissible only when the parent is wrongfully harmed or killed, and no justice system will punish the wrongdoer.

The Confucian argument for blood vengeance and the restrictions it lays out to regulate the act of revenge are general principles regarding the actions on the level of individuals. However, the actual historical events the above two fragments allude to are the most well-known *Gongyang*’s stories of wars of revenge: the story that Wu Zixu 伍子胥 assisted the state of Wu 吳 to attack the state of Chu 楚 to avenge his father and the story that Duke Xiang of Qi 齊襄公 invaded the state of Ji 紀 to avenge his ancestor. This perplexing situation gives rise to the question of whether Confucianism would approve carrying out blood vengeance *via* inter-state wars.

¹⁵ Wang Mengou, *Liji jinzhū jinyi* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2006), 44.

¹⁶ Miller. *The Gongyang Commentary*, 251.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

2. Does Confucianism Approve War of Revenge?

Confucian view on war of revenge has been a marginalized topic in the study of Confucianism. The main reason is that discourses from Confucian texts on the topic are scarce, and they tend to be controversial. There are a few fragments that explicitly address the topic. Yet, they are mostly from the *Gongyang Commentary*, which is also known for the Sino-Barbarian dichotomy.¹⁸ This dichotomy is often emphasized as the Chinese cultural root of nationalism. Since it is embraced by some Chinese cultural conservatives, many may keep a vigilant eye on this branch of “traditional thought” and its relevance to today’s Chinese perspective on international relations. The combination of the Sino-Barbarian dichotomy and zealous advocacy of vengeance renders the *Gongyang Commentary* a good recipe for breeding distrust and paranoia between China and other countries.¹⁹

Chinese nationalistic and cultural conservatives tend to focus on certain fragments of the *Gongyang Commentary* and reconstruct a radical Confucian view on war of revenge. Some would even present the reconstruction as the authoritative voice of Confucianism. Jiang Qing 蔣慶, for example, claims that Confucius enthusiastically advocates revenge, and this stance is the spirit of the Chinese nation. To defend this claim, Jiang devotes an entire section of his monograph on *Gongyang* scholarship to “Grand Vendetta” theory: a theory holding that waging wars for avenging one’s distant ancestors is morally acceptable.

The Grand Vendetta theory refers to the pro-vengeance theory advocated by the *Gongyang* scholarship. When it comes to events of revenge in the classics of *Spring and Autumn*, Confucius always wrote a great deal about them to elaborate on the morality of revenge.²⁰

The type of revenge that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* considers justified, Jiang argues, includes war of blood vengeance:

¹⁸ Yuri Pines, “Beasts or humans: Pre-imperial origins of the ‘Sino-Barbarian’ dichotomy,” *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, 11 (2005), 59-102.

¹⁹ This is perhaps why Pines thinks Jiang Qing should say more on the topic in his translated book on the *Gongyang Commentary*. As Pines states in his review on Jiang Qing’s book: “The *Gongyang zhuan* does contain many interesting (albeit highly controversial) ideas, which Jiang Qing never addresses. What should be made of the highly pronounced Sino-barbarian dichotomy in the text? How should the idea that nothing is external to the True Monarch (*wangzhe wu wai* 王者無外) be related to the modern system of international relations?”

²⁰ Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 260.

In the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, this type of revenge refers to the event of Duke Xiang's eradicating Ji state for avenging an ancestor from nine generations ago, who was murdered because of the slander by the then Duke of Ji, and to the event of the battle Duke Zhuang of Lu had with Qi troops for avenging his father, who was murdered by Duke Xiang of Qi. These two revenge events share two features: both revenge acts were intended to avenge murdered blood relatives, and the other is that both avengers are state rulers; hence, their revenge acts became political events between states.²¹

The first case is the war launched by the Duke Xiang of Qi against Ji. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* refers to the war in a very terse and obscure way. Rather than saying that the Ji state was eradicated, it says that "the Marquis of Ji took an ultimate leave from his state," as if the Marquis of Ji himself left his state, and the state of Ji remained intact.²² The *Gongyang Commentary* explains why the classic uses such an expression of "took an ultimate leave" (*da qu* 大去), saying:

What is suggested by the phrase "took an ultimate leave"? It means that [the state of Ji] was destroyed. Who destroyed it? The state of Qi destroyed it. Why does not [the record] say that Qi destroyed it? To euphemize [the behavior of] the Duke of Xiang. The *Chunqiu* euphemizes for the worthy. What was worthy about Duke Xiang? He [was worthy in that he] avenged a wrong. What was the grudge? It was done to a distant ancestor. Duke Ai [of Qi] was boiled alive by the Zhou because [the then] Marquis of Ji slandered [him]. Duke Xiang did this because he [wanted to] exhaust his devotion to the service of his ancestors. How did he exhaust his devotion? When Duke Xiang was about to avenge the state of Ji, he performed divination, which read: "Half the army will be lost." [Duke Xiang replied, saying,] "Even if I will die for it, I will not regard it as inauspicious."²³

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Miller, *The Gongyang Commentary*, 51.

²³ *Ibid.*

The *Gongyang Commentary* believes that the euphemistic wording is intended to gloss over Duke Xiang's act because the classic approves the morality of Duke Xiang's act of avenging his distant ancestor.

“As to the ‘distant ancestor’, at what remove was he?”
 “Nine generations.” “Is a vengeance at a removal of nine generations still permissible?” “Even at a removal of one hundred generations, [vengeance] is still permissible.”²⁴

The *Gongyang Commentary* even expresses an extreme perspective that avenging an ancestor at removing one hundred generations is still permissible.

As such a perspective is too radical to be defended, a natural question would be if the *Gongyang Commentary* indeed thinks that it is morally acceptable for one to avenge his ancestor when the perpetrator had already died, and it is morally acceptable to take vengeance in the form of inter-state war. For Jiang Qing, the answer is positive. He argues that because the avengers are state rulers, “the revenge acts became political events between states.”²⁵ Yet, being a state ruler does not mean one must resort to wars to take revenge. Also, that blood vengeance is justified does not imply that war is a justified means for avenging one's direct-blood relatives, not to mention launching a war to avenge an ancient ancestor. Jiang is also aware of how strange the perspective is, so he says, “One can avenge a wrong made a hundred years ago is indeed extreme and peculiar and thus requires theoretical elaborations to convince people.”²⁶ He thus constructs a theory to support the advocacy of war for avenging ancestors:

Gongyang scholars utilize the theory of “state and the ruler are of one body” to support the extreme view that “one can avenge a wrong made a hundred years ago.” From Gongyang's perspective, a state differs from a household in that a state is the territory of a regional ruler; once a state is established, it is permanent and will be succeeded by offspring generation by generation: a state is hereditary. Since the one who inherits the state is the state ruler, the state ruler and the state are one body. [...] The state of Qi today inherits the glory and shame from the state of Qi in the past, so the duke of Qi is responsible not only for today's Qi but also for the Qi in

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 260.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

history. For this reason, the *Gongyang* thinks the shame of the death of Duke Xiang of Qi's nine generations ago ancestor Duke Ai is Duke Xiang's shame. Therefore, Duke Xiang must inflict harm on Ji state to wipe out the shame. Only by doing so could he be responsible for the Qi state and fulfil his duty as the state ruler.²⁷

Jiang draws on the "one body" (*yi ti* 一體) thesis in the *Gongyang Commentary*, arguing that the state and the state ruler are unified, and so do the present and past state rulers. Therefore, the shame of a previous ruler should be the shame of the present ruler and his state. Therefore, the present ruler of Qi should revenge on the present Ji because a previous ruler of Ji had a previous ruler of Qi killed.

This is indeed how the *Gongyang Commentary* defends Duke Xiang's case. However, as Jiang concedes, and as other scholars have declared, the *Gongyang Commentary* does not consistently subscribe to this radical view: it does not apply the view consistently to all cases.²⁸ Moreover, other commentaries of *Spring and Autumn Annals* do not attribute this radical view to the classic, nor do other Confucian texts approve of war of revenge. The extreme advocacy of vengeance occurs in the tradition of New-Text classicism, almost exclusively in the *Gongyang Commentary*.²⁹ As Jiang suggests, the *Gongyang Commentary*, perhaps out of some ulterior political motives, uses blood vengeance as an excuse to sugarcoat Qi's military act for territorial expansion.³⁰ More importantly, as mentioned earlier, the *Gongyang Commentary* defends the case of Qi's invasion with the principle that an act of revenge is permissible only if there is no authority to administer justice. The authority to enforce justice in the case was the Son of Heaven. Yet, the ancient ruler of Qi was executed by the Son of Heaven, not by the then Ji ruler, but due to the Ji ruler's slander. However, the *Gongyang Commentary* justifies Qi's revenge with a rhetorical question: "Assuming there was an enlightened Son of Heaven, could Duke Xiang have acted as he did?" It answers the question immediately: "The answer is no. How, then, are his actions justified? With no Son of Heaven above or leader of states rulers below, one is subject only to

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 262.

²⁸ See *Ibid.* and Li, *Fuchou Guan de Shengcha yu Quanshi*.

²⁹ See Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 277; Li Hanji, "Fuchou de xian zhi: cong Guliangzhuang de zhengzhi guandian kan" (Restrictions on revenge: from the political perspectives of Guliang Commentary), in *Zhongguo zhaxue shi*, 1 (2017), 67-72; and Zhao Kuang, "'Zhao shi guer' de liang ge mianxiang: 'da fu chou' yu kaoguxue'" (Two dimensions of the story "The Orphan of Zhao": Grand Vendetta and Archeological Investigation), in *Lanzhou daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban*, 46, no. 3 (2018), 116-126.

³⁰ Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 265-266.

the pleasure and pain of his ancestors.”³¹ So, what is unspoken is that the *Gongyang Commentary* does not consider the Son of Heaven “enlightened.” Even more strangely, it holds that with the absence of an enlightened Son of Heaven, the Ji state should be the target of revenge. This shows that the *Gongyang Commentary* does not recognize the authority of the existing sovereignty and that what it actually supports is powerful states annexing small states.

As Jiang also concedes, what distinguishes the Gongyang scholarship from other strands of Confucianism is its rebellious nature.³² This, I believe, is the main trait of original Confucianism: it does not recognize the existing political system and wishes to replace it with a “morally superior” true King (*wang zhe* 王者). This is the reason why it approves wars of annexation, so long as they were launched on moral grounds and could potentially lead to the unification of all under Heaven under one ruler. This is the Confucian approach of ending the situation of constant inter-state wars.³³ In other words, what this strand of Confucianism advocates is not war of revenge but war of annexation and total unification. As Jiang suggests, “blood vengeance” is more of a pretext. Remember that the *Gongyang Commentary* uses the “one body” thesis to argue that Duke Xiang of Qi could legitimately invade Ji to avenge his distant ancestor. Because he and the ancestor and their state are of “one body,” Duke Xiang must avenge his ancestor and could take vengeance with the state. This “one body” argument seems to suggest that Confucianism, at least Gongyang Confucianism, would approve the idea that “state” can be an agent of an act of revenge and inter-state war can be a means of retaliation. However, it should be noted that the “one body” is a key notion in the early masters’ debate concerning whether a state ruler could use his people to fight the battles for his ambition of annexing other states. In the debate, Mohists and Yangist masters argued that a state ruler could not use his people to fight such wars in the name of caring for all under Heaven because the ruler of the state and the people of the state are not of the same body. For one thing, the people and the ruler were not blood relatives. For another, the people were not really owned by the state; they could move to

³¹ Miller, *The Gongyang Commentary*, 52.

³² See Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 275.

³³ See Ting-mien Lee, “Benevolence-Righteousness’ as Strategic Terminology: Reading Mengzi’s ‘Ren-Yi’ through Strategic Manuals,” in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 16, no. 1 (2017), 15-34 and “To Become the King of All under Heaven: Mengzi as a Strategist of Regime Subversion,” in *Critique, Subversion, and Chinese Philosophy: Sociopolitical, Conceptual, and Methodological Challenges*, ed. by Hans-Georg Moeller and Andrew K. Whitehead (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). I am therefore sympathetic to the New-Text Confucian thinkers’ (such as Kang Youwei) insight about original Confucianism. While I disagree with most of Jiang Qing’s generalized claims about China’s national spirit and the essence of Chinese culture, I second his New-Text interpretation about the rebellious nature of original Confucianism.

other states to bear no more tyranny. However, the *Gongyang Commentary* utilizes the “one body” principle to argue that at least a state ruler could claim to be of one body with his ancestors and justify his wars for blood vengeance on this moral ground.³⁴ If the “one body” principle could be extended across one hundred generations, a war could be justified as long as it is between hereditary regimes.

Given all this, a possible explanation is that the *Gongyang Commentary* does not really advocate retributive war as it is understood today. On some occasions, it uses blood vengeance as an excuse to support a military invasion for a hereditary state when the invasion could optimize the opportunity for the reunification of all under Heaven and the usurpation of the ultimate power. Even if we are to assume that the *Gongyang Commentary* is the most authoritative interpretation of the Confucian classic *Spring and Autumn Annals* (this is still in question) and that it does hold that it is legitimate for a state to wage wars against another state if the ancient ruler of the state was wronged by the ancient ruler of the other state (this is also in question), this perspective is not germane to today’s China and its relationship with the international community. Under the current political system, none of the contemporary Chinese rulers is of “one body” with previous rulers; the rulers of most other countries are also not of “one body” with their previous rulers. Therefore, theoretically, there should be no wars China would declare for blood vengeance even if *Gongyang* Confucianism largely determines its military decisions.

Interestingly, Jiang Qing and some other scholars argue that *Gongyang’s* radical perspective on revenge war is the representative and authoritative opinion of Confucianism, and it is still relevant today. They even “extend” the principle to modern “countries” and “nations” and their “people,” while the *Gongyang Commentary* applies the “one body” thesis to rulers of hereditary states only. Yu Kam-por, for example, argued that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is “a particularly authoritative text in the Confucian tradition,” and it “provides a much richer and more systematic picture of Confucian views on war.”³⁵ He then argued that the classic is a sourcebook of practical political ethics, which is still relevant today because “in many ways, the historical background of the Spring and Autumn period is similar to the world situation today: There is no central world government.”³⁶ “[T]he *Spring and Autumn* regard a country that has been the victim of past injustice as having a legitimate reason to initiate a war against

³⁴ Regarding the debate of the “one body” principle in the Warring States period, see Lee (forthcoming).

³⁵ Yu, “Confucian Views on War as Seen in the *Gongyang Commentary* on the Spring and Autumn Annals,” 98.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

those who have wronged them.”³⁷ This claim squares neither with the *Gongyang Commentary* nor with the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The wars of revenge recorded in the texts were not launched by “countries” or “victims of the past.” Also, the states did not initiate wars against “those” who have wronged “them.” Such wording yields an impression that Confucianism holds that it is legitimate for a country, or a victim of the past, to declare a war against another country who victimized it because the “they” of the victim country were wronged by the “they” of the other country.

Yu’s portrayal of Confucianism is tricky in many ways. First, the wars recorded in the *Gongyang Commentary* were launched by rulers of hereditary states in the name of their blood relatives rather than by countries in the name of their people. Second, the “victims” in the Confucian texts are not the people of the states but rather the ancestors of the state rulers. Third, the pro-vengeance perspective appears only in the *Gongyang Commentary*, but Yu attributes it to the classic of *Spring and Autumn Annals* and Confucianism in general, arguing that this classic is “a particularly authoritative text in the Confucian tradition” and that it is especially relevant to today’s international situation. Finally, he argues that this *Gongyang* perspective is particularly relevant to the contemporary situation regarding the lack of central world government, whereas the *Gongyang Commentary* defends the case by saying that there was no enlightened Son of Heaven.

The aforementioned academic discourses are as eye-catching as Jiang Qing’s. For example, to conclude his discussion of *Gongyang*’s “Grand Vendetta” theory, Jiang claims:

Since ancient times, the Chinese nation has been a nation that values a sense of shame. What does it mean? It means that [the nation] takes the shameful events very heavily and considers it the most basic standard for one’s integrity as a person in the society. If a person does not have a sense of shame, Chinese people would not consider this person a human; the person should lose the right to be seen as a human.³⁸

Based on *Gongyang*’s interpretation of some instances recorded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Jiang Qing makes a provocative claim about the Chinese nation’s basic moral requirement for a person to be treated as a human being. Intriguingly, when not many Chinese books on classicism are translated into English, Jiang’s work has been translated and published in

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁸ Jiang Qing, *Gongyang*, 271.

English and is widely circulated in the West. Its peculiar marketability in the West, or an English context, perhaps tells us something about the changing nature or function of the academic discourse of Chinese philosophy at the turn of the Chinese rise.³⁹ Paradoxically, when the academic discourse of Chinese philosophy is expected to provide some guidelines or consultations for policymaking or strategy planning, it is shaped or selected according to what is expected to be heard. Some academic discourses on the Confucian perspective on revenge war, as illustrated above, are formulated to resonate and fuel the unceasing worry underlying the Western narrative about China as a “victim” and as a “threat.” As Ge Zhaoguang (2017) once comments on the recent trend of Chinese cultural conservatism, some academics of Chinese philosophy become impetuous; they are eager to utilize Confucianism to create proposals for Chinese domestic and foreign policies on little textual basis. Some Confucian views on world order are based more on an “imagination” about Chinese history and thought. However, since this is a trend that gains a broad audience, it gradually becomes a “science”: a serious academic research field.⁴⁰ It is difficult to assess this ongoing trend and predict with any academic rigor how it will influence the study of Chinese philosophy or China studies. However, it may be a question worthwhile to explore: what is the nature of the task of utilizing Chinese philosophy to address contemporary questions?

Conclusion

As China is playing an increasingly important role in the world arena, some academics are paying more attention to Chinese philosophical discussions on world order and warfare. Confucian texts offer abundant discourses about just war. According to them, some wars might be permissible or even morally justified. One of the most controversial cases is retributive war. For one thing, retribution has been a contested issue in ethics, let alone being exhibited in the form of war. For another, in the context of wide acceptance of the narrative of China as a “threat,” the claim that Confucianism advocates war of revenge might grab international attention.

With inadequate textual evidence, some contemporary scholars of Confucianism defend a zealous account of war as a form of vengeance. They attribute Confucianism a radical view that it is morally acceptable to wage wars to seek revenge against a wrongdoer who has already passed away. However, in this study, it was argued that such an account is mainly based

³⁹ David Elstein, “On Jiang Qing: Guest Editor's Introduction,” in *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, 45, no. 1 (2013): 3-8.

⁴⁰ Ge Zhaoguang, “Dui ‘Tianxia’ de Xiangxiang” [An Imagination about “all under Heaven,”] in *Sixiang*, 29 (2015), 13-34.

on a *Spring and Autumn Annals* commentary, and the commentary does not really subscribe to this radical perspective.

The analysis points to the potential problem of the recent academic trend of utilizing Confucianism to address contemporary issues. Such attempts sometimes treat Confucianism as a homogeneous system of thought and concentrate excessively on radical, eye-catching statements. For example, in the case of the Confucian perspective on war of revenge, it is an overstatement that Confucianism glorifies war for rehabilitating national humiliation. Nevertheless, it is still a popular interpretation. The case study suggests that due to the rise of China and the increasing relevance of Chinese philosophy, the scholarly rigidity of the academic discourse of Chinese philosophy became a tricky issue. As it might have potential substantial impacts, the academic discourse of Chinese philosophy is susceptible to (conscious or not) manipulation or exploitation. This study is a preliminary attempt to describe the phenomenon with a case study. More studies are needed to explore the peculiar interplay between academic discourses of Chinese philosophy and China studies in the changing situations of international relations.

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