

Original Paper

Confucius' View of Hierarchy from the Perspective of Fen

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Abstract

As a core concept in pre-Qin Confucian thought, fen is both the logical starting point of social order and the spiritual support of ritual and legal institutions. Although Confucius does not directly and systematically elaborate the concept of fen in his recorded statements, the li and zhengming that he advocates are in fact grounded in fen and aim to establish distinctions of rank, honor, responsibility, and role among persons. Starting from the philological meaning and institutional origin of fen, this article examines its forms of expression in the system of the Rites of Zhou and then investigates how fen is embedded in the intellectual construction of Confucius' view of hierarchy. Through the three dimensions of defining fen through li, consolidating fen through ren, and clarifying fen in the application of punishment, the article shows how Confucius internalizes fen as an ethical principle and externalizes it as social order, giving it concrete expression in the human relations between ruler and minister, father and son, elder and younger, and husband and wife. Through a comparative analysis of Xunzi's thought on fen, the article further highlights the tension and extension between the moralized tendency of Confucius' concept of fen and the rationalized turn of Xunzi's thought on fen. Finally, the article attempts to reinterpret the Confucian idea of hierarchy under the modern discourse of equality. It argues that fen is not a tool for suppressing the individual, but a reasonable division of responsibility and role in the construction of an ordered society, and therefore has theoretical value across ancient and modern contexts.

Keywords

fen, Confucius, view of hierarchy, honoring the honored, loving the kin, and maintaining distinctions

1. Introduction

The chapter Wangzhi in Xunzi states: Human strength is inferior to that of oxen, and human speed is inferior to that of horses, yet oxen and horses are used by humans. Why is this so? The answer is that humans can form communities, whereas they cannot. What enables humans to form communities? The

answer is fen. Xunzi (2011) makes clear here that the decisive feature distinguishing human beings from birds and beasts is sociality, namely the capacity to form groups. The fundamental reason that society can operate in an orderly manner is fen. Fen not only expresses differences among people and the allocation of duties within social relations, but also constitutes a basic principle of social structure. From the perspective of intellectual development, Xunzi's emphasis on fen is an important extension and theoretical deepening of the Confucian thought of Confucius and Mencius. Examining Confucius' view of hierarchy from the perspective of fen therefore has both theoretical grounds and scholarly value. Although Confucius never systematically proposes the concept of fen, the li that he advocates is essentially a normative expression of fen. Confucius emphasizes that the ruler should act as ruler, the minister as minister, the father as father, and the son as son. He argues that people should remain in their proper positions and fulfill their respective responsibilities. This ordered arrangement of roles precisely reflects the hierarchical and normative function of fen in an abstract sense.

Scholars have already paid attention to the origin and status of the idea of fen. Many researchers point out that the concept of fen appears in pre-Qin classical texts. Xunzi, for example, explains the meaning of li through the clarification of fen and holds that the essence of li lies in clarifying fen in order to make yi intelligible. This shows that fen was initially used to explain hierarchy and order and that it functioned in both the relation between Heaven and humanity and the structure of society. With historical development, the thought of fen gradually became an important concept for maintaining the order of the feudal ritual system. Li Zhongyi argues that fen is an important connotation of li and that pre-Qin Confucian political thought contains the idea of clarifying fen and rectifying names, thereby making the social hierarchy clear. Chen Jihong studies such issues as the theoretical foundation of fen, the relation between fen and mingfen, the relation between fen and human relations, and the political and institutional design of fen. Chen Wei (2011) from the perspective of legal philosophy, reveals the basic dimensions and systematic structure of Xunzi's thought on fen. In sum, researchers generally regard fen as one of the core Confucian ideas for maintaining social hierarchy and the division of responsibilities. Its intellectual status is indispensable in the ritual and legal system and is continuously reinforced as the ritual system evolves.

With regard to Confucius, fen has not been studied in depth as an independent topic. Although Confucius himself does not separately propose a doctrine of fen in the *Analects* and related texts, his words and actions reflect a clear spirit of hierarchical order. The statement in the *Analects* that the ruler should act as ruler, the minister as minister, the father as father, and the son as son expresses the Confucian ethical demand that each person fulfill his proper fen. Scholarship usually places this point within discussions of the theory of clarifying fen and rectifying names or within the order of ritual governance. Confucius emphasizes that li is the foundation of social stability. His view that, when names are not correct, speech is not coherent, and when rites and music do not flourish, punishments do not fit, implies that ritual and law can be properly implemented only when status hierarchy is clear.

Overall, the spirit of hierarchical order in Confucius is more often mentioned as part of his idea of rule through li.

In modern society, equality has become one of the dominant discourses. The Confucian view of hierarchy represented by Confucius in traditional Chinese culture is often treated as a conservative remnant that conflicts with modern values. Yet if one sets aside the stereotyped misunderstanding of hierarchy and returns to the internal structure of Confucius' thought, it is not difficult to see that the Confucian view of hierarchy has a complex structure and profound ethical meaning. Its core is not the suppression of individuals or the maintenance of privilege, but the construction of an ordered and harmonious social order through fen, that is, through the reasonable differentiation of roles, responsibilities, and relations. Confucius' teaching that the ruler should act as ruler, the minister as minister, the father as father, and the son as son is not intended to freeze status differences. It stresses that every member of society should remain in an appropriate position and fulfill the corresponding responsibility. Reexamining the Confucian view of hierarchy, especially the order-oriented idea centered on fen, may provide a useful supplementary path for contemporary social governance. If fen is reinterpreted as a reasonable division of labor and assumption of responsibility based on difference, it can add an ethical dimension to the modern idea of equality and allow formal equality and the ethics of responsibility to complement each other. This article therefore takes fen as its perspective and reexamines the intellectual foundation, forms of expression, and contemporary significance of Confucius' view of hierarchy, with the aim of revealing its theoretical value within the modern discourse of equality.

2. The Meaning of Fen: Conceptual Clarification and Intellectual Origins

2.1 The Original and Extended Meanings of the Character Fen

From the perspective of philology, the explanation of fen in Shuowen Jiezi has important graphological significance. It reveals the original meaning of the character and also implies an internal connection with Confucius' thought on fen. Shuowen Jiezi explains: Fen means to distinguish. It is composed of ba and dao, because a knife distinguishes things. (Xu, 2015) An analysis of the graphic structure of fen shows that ba, written in oracle-bone script in the form of two parts turning away from each other, originally means division, while dao, as a cutting tool, expresses the active operation of fen. When an object is cut with a knife and divided into two parts, the basic meaning of fen is therefore division and distinction. At the physical level, it refers to the cutting or allocation of concrete things. Examples include the sense of dissection in the story of Cook Ding cutting up an ox in accordance with the natural patterns, opening the large gaps and guiding the knife through the large hollows [4], and the material need in agrarian society to divide fields and distribute stipends. Over time, fen derived the meaning of belonging and possession, with an implication of rights. In the Zuo Zhuan, King Ling of Chu says to Zige that his ancestor Xiong Yi served King Kang together with Lu Ji, Wangsun Mou, Xie fu, and Qin fu, and that all four states received enfeoffments, whereas Chu alone did not. Now that

he sends someone to Zhou and takes the ding vessel as the warrant of enfeoffment, he asks whether the king will grant an enfeoffment to Chu. (Zhuang, 2022) Here fen means enfeoffment. It represents both the confirmation by the Zhou Son of Heaven of the legitimacy of a feudal lord's status and the belonging of the land. (Zuo, 2022) Thus, at the abstract level, fen can be extended to mean the definition of status, responsibility, or proper title.

2.2 The Expression of Fen in the Rites of Zhou

If fen can serve as a guiding idea that governs the construction of Confucius' view of hierarchy, and if Confucius' view of hierarchy is rooted in the inheritance and development of the rites of Zhou, then fen, as a principle of social order, had already received relatively complete expression in its extended meaning within the ritual system of the Zhou dynasty.

During the Western Zhou, especially in the age of the Duke of Zhou, the core of the ritual system began to take shape. The ritual system of this period focused on establishing a unified order between kinship and social hierarchy, thereby forming the basis of social order. The distance of kinship relations and the vertical distinctions of status hierarchy expressed the interconnection and interweaving of family and state. This principle emphasized the core ideas of loving the kin, honoring the honored, respecting elders, and maintaining distinctions between men and women, and it became the foundation of the moral order of human society. When this principle was extended to the level of the state, it rose to the level of the kingly way, the highest principle of governing the state. Through ritual measures, standards of measurement, examination of documents, revision of calendars, changes in clothing, the setting of insignia, the differentiation of implements, and distinctions in dress, the ritual system became more finely institutionalized and standardized.

In the system of the Rites of Zhou, social control is carried out through the stratification of fixed identities established by ritual symbols. The statement that li determines closeness and distance, resolves doubts, distinguishes sameness and difference, and clarifies right and wrong explicitly defines the functions of li as determining kinship distance and distinguishing sameness from difference. Through material carriers and ritual behavior, the ritual system turns abstract hierarchy into a visible system of status markers and into explicit conditions that can be followed in real life. (Lu, 2009) The Tianguan Shanfan section of the Rites of Zhou clearly stipulates that the king makes one offering each day and uses twelve ding vessels. (Duke of Zhou, 2022) This is the first institutionalization of the number of ding vessels used by the Son of Heaven in sacrifice as twelve, marking the entry of ritual vessel configuration into a codified and hierarchical stage. He Xiu's commentary on the second year of Duke Huan in the Gongyang Zhuan further refines this system by proposing a graded structure in which the Son of Heaven has nine ding and eight gui, while feudal lords have seven ding and six gui. It establishes numerical standards for ritual vessels corresponding to different ranks. This system not only reflects strict quantitative control in ritual norms, but is also an externalized expression of the idea of fen at the material level. Through differences in the number and types of vessels, abstract hierarchy and honor are clearly encoded into every ritual action in social life. The principle that ritual vessels have

grades and institutions have order is not limited to sacrificial ritual. It penetrates broader spatial levels. Taking residential architecture as an example, the Liji records that the hall of the Son of Heaven is nine chi high, while that of a feudal lord is seven chi high, showing that architectural space itself is endowed with symbolic meaning of status hierarchy. In this context, space is no longer a neutral place of use, but becomes a visible language of fen, conveying authority and rank through differences of scale. Even in funerary ritual, there are explicit rules: the coffin of the Son of Heaven has four layers, that of a feudal lord three layers, that of a great officer two layers, and that of a shi one layer. [8]Both the living and the dead are incorporated into the hierarchical network of the ritual system. This design of ritual vessels and rites that runs through the whole course of life is precisely the visible performance of fen in social practice.

In political division of labor, the Rites of Zhou is central. It divides social functions into six offices, each corresponding to a different field of state governance. The Tianguan prime minister, as the head of all officials, not only manages palace affairs but also achieves state economic regulation through the fiscal system of nine taxes and nine expenditures. The ritual and musical system of the Chunguan minister of rites is not a simple ritual norm. Through the five rites, namely auspicious, inauspicious, military, guest, and festive rites, it constructs a multidimensional political order that covers religion, diplomacy, and military affairs. Social occupations are divided into four categories: shi, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Shi, comprising officials and intellectuals, occupy the first position and are responsible for governance and instruction. Farmers are the foundation of the state, while artisans and merchants support production and circulation. This division of labor is fixed through ritual and law and emphasizes that each person should remain in the proper fen and perform the proper function. Occupational division of labor is often combined with patriarchal kinship, as seen in hereditary offices or the transmission of family skills, and the ritual system maintains the stability of social strata. In family ethical norms, there is an order among father and son, husband and wife, and elder and younger. The internal division of labor in the family takes filial piety and fraternal respect as its core. The father attends to affairs outside the household and the mother to affairs inside it. Elder and younger are ordered, and primogeniture becomes the ritual and legal basis for the transmission of family authority. Funeral rites further reinforce the graded closeness of kin relations and clarify the division of responsibilities among family members.

More importantly, this ritual system does not merely mark hierarchy through material forms. It also strengthens, at the conceptual level, the recognition of fen among members of society. When Confucius mocks Zang Wenzhong for keeping a tortoise in a room with mountain-shaped brackets and algae-painted beam ends (Yang, 2019), he is in fact criticizing the improper use in a tortoise chamber of architectural features reserved for the ancestral temple of the Son of Heaven. This transgression in architectural style is not simply an aesthetic excess, but a challenge to the social hierarchy constructed by the ritual system. Within the normative logic of li, exceeding the system means exceeding one's position, and usurping ritual means usurping authority. The outward expression of li is in substance a

visible confirmation of the order of status.

Therefore, as a tool of social control and identity construction, the fundamental purpose of li is to implement the hierarchical order implied by fen. Through a full set of external material and behavioral norms involving ritual vessels, architecture, clothing, language, and other forms, it concretizes abstract ethical order into a mode of social practice that can be sensed, seen, and performed. Through daily contact with these ritual symbols, individuals are constantly reminded of, internalize, and become accustomed to their own status positions, so that hierarchical ideas are transformed from external discipline into internal recognition. Li is not only a restraint on conduct, but also the formation of cognition. It is not only the implementation of norms, but also the accumulation of cultural memory. It is the most direct and symbolically concrete institutional embodiment of the idea of fen, and it is the core means and external representation for maintaining the hierarchical social structure of the Zhou rites.

3. Fen and the Constructive Logic of Confucius' View of Hierarchy

3.1 From the Unity of Heaven and Humanity to Fen: The Natural Basis of Confucius' View of Hierarchy

The natural basis of Confucius' view of hierarchy can be traced to his basic proposition concerning the relation between Heaven and humanity. Although Confucius himself does not construct a systematic doctrine of the unity of Heaven and humanity, he consistently emphasizes the internal continuity between the human way and the way of Heaven through the lifelong practice of learning below and penetrating above. His view of Heaven and humanity mainly derives from his inheritance of the Zhou idea of the Mandate of Heaven. In the cosmological scheme of the Zhouyi, Heaven and Earth are the concrete manifestations of qian and kun, yin and yang. As the text says, Heaven bestows and Earth brings forth, and their benefit has no boundary. (Yang, 2011) Since qian and kun, yin and yang, differ in honor and lowliness, Heaven and Earth also differ in superiority and inferiority. This hierarchical order marked by distinctions between high and low is not only reflected in the relation between Heaven and Earth, but also in all things. The Xici section of the Zhouyi states that Heaven is honored and Earth is lowly, and qian and kun are thereby fixed; high and low are displayed, and noble and base take their positions; movement and stillness have constancy, and firm and yielding are determined; things gather by category and beings divide by groups, and good and ill fortune arise. In simple terms, all things between Heaven and Earth have distinctions of noble and base. (Yang, 2011) The honored are above and the lowly below, and distinctions of movement and stillness, firmness and yielding are constant natural laws.

Ancient thinkers held that natural disasters and anomalies often reflected disorder in human affairs, especially failures in the virtue of rulers. The explanation that earthquakes are warnings from Heaven, that when virtue is not cultivated and government is not carried out the earth moves in order to move people (Ban, 2012), interprets earthquakes as warnings from Heaven to a ruler who lacks virtue and

fails in proper governance. Likewise, the view that a solar eclipse is a disaster of the Son of Heaven (Ban, 2012) stresses the close connection between natural disasters such as solar eclipses and the virtue of the Son of Heaven. These natural phenomena are not only events in the physical world, but also contain principles to which human society should be alert. Through reverence for Heaven and interpretation of natural anomalies, Confucius attempts to guide people to attend to the moral condition of society and the justice of governance. Therefore, when Confucius speaks of Heaven, although his words include belief in the absolute will of Heaven and the need for human beings to honor Heaven and act in reverence for the Mandate of Heaven, as in the statement that the gentleman has three things to fear, namely the Mandate of Heaven, great persons, and the words of sages, while petty persons do not know the Mandate of Heaven and therefore do not fear it, treat great persons with familiarity, and insult the words of sages (Yang, 2019), he also sees the practice of human ethical norms as both moral cultivation and obedience to the way of Heaven. At the same time, the idea of the absolute will of Heaven requires a reverent and concentrated inner discipline, so that the human heart may dwell in accord with the heart of Heaven.

In Confucius' ethical thought, although he inherits the Zhou tradition of revering Heaven and compares himself with shamans, scribes, and ritual specialists, saying that he follows the same path as scribes and shamans but reaches a different destination, he gives greater attention to the distinctions within human relations. He emphasizes the cosmic sequence disclosed in the Xugua section of the Zhouyi: after Heaven and Earth there are the myriad things; after the myriad things there are male and female; after male and female there are husband and wife; after husband and wife there are father and son; after father and son there are ruler and minister; after ruler and minister there are high and low; after high and low, ritual and righteousness have a place to be arranged. (Yang, 2011) This sequence constructs a corresponding relation between natural order and human ethical order. In this relation between Heaven and humanity, *fen* receives legitimacy and becomes the core for regulating human relations and maintaining social stability. The differentiated social order expressed in the formula that the ruler acts as ruler, the minister as minister, the father as father, and the son as son is therefore not a simple artificial rule, but an ethical projection of the structural correspondence between Heaven and humanity.

3.2 From Fen to Zhengming: The Intellectual Support of Confucius' View of Hierarchy

Confucius lived in an age in which rites collapsed and music decayed. He attributed social disorder to the destruction of the original *fen* established according to the rites of Zhou. He states that when the world has the Way, rites, music, punitive expeditions, and campaigns proceed from the Son of Heaven; when the world lacks the Way, they proceed from the feudal lords. If they proceed from the feudal lords, the line rarely avoids loss after ten generations; if they proceed from great officers, it rarely avoids loss after five generations; if subordinate ministers control the commands of the state, it rarely avoids loss after three generations. When the world has the Way, government is not in the hands of great officers; when the world lacks the Way, common people do not deliberate on government. (Ruan, 2009) The root of the disorder of the Spring and Autumn period lies in usurpations of ritual such as rites, music,

campaigns, and punitive expeditions proceeding from feudal lords, and subordinate ministers controlling state commands. Such phenomena mean that the hierarchical titles and the corresponding rights and duties established by the Zhou rites have been violently trampled, and that the original boundaries of rank among people have been blurred. The Analects also records Confucius' metaphorical questioning of the ritual crisis of the Spring and Autumn period: A gu that is not a gu, can it be called a gu? A gu is an ancient wine vessel with four angular edges on its body and four on its foot.[9] Later, the word gu was used more broadly for wine vessels holding three sheng. When Confucius says that a gu no longer resembles a gu and asks whether it is still a gu, he is in fact using the mismatch between name and reality in the vessel as a metaphorical criticism of the serious separation between names and realities in the non-ritual condition of the society of his time.

The above discussion shows that, in Confucius' view, the destruction of the order of fen established by the Zhou rites is caused by the failure of names to be correct. This means not only that individuals lack accurate positioning within the hierarchical order, but more importantly that names no longer correspond to realities, resulting in names without substance. Confucius' theory of zhengming is not an abstract theoretical construction. It is a strategic response to the specific political crisis in the state of Wei, where the double identities of ruler and minister, father and son, were displaced. (Zhou, 2019) According to the Kongzi Shijia in the Records of the Grand Historian, in the sixth year of Duke Ai of Lu, 489 BCE, Confucius encountered the political dilemma in Wei in which the father of Lord Zhe of Wei could not be established and remained outside the state, and other feudal lords repeatedly reproached Wei for it. At this time, Wei was in the unusual situation of father and son competing for the state. Duke Chu Zhe had succeeded as the legitimate grandson, while his father Kuaikui was in exile after an attempted assassination of Nanzi. Kuaikui's exile caused by personal moral failure created an ethical defect in his status as legitimate eldest son. The institutional dilemma facing the ducal house of Wei was that, if Kuaikui's right of succession were recognized, his evil act of attempted matricide had to be explained; if Zhe's legitimacy were upheld, the ethical paradox of a son refusing the return of his father had to be addressed. The violation of ritual in which the son held the state while the father remained outside generated moral criticism from the feudal states. When Zilu asked what Confucius would put first if the ruler of Wei waited for him to govern, Confucius answered that it must be the rectification of names. (Gou, 2015)

This practice of zhengming is not limited to the revision of concepts at the linguistic level. More deeply, it means correcting improper uses of names through the standard of li. That is, li regulates and confirms the use of names, ensuring that names accurately reflect the hierarchical order of honor, lowliness, nobility, and baseness prescribed by li. In essence, this approach reconstructs the ritual order through the debate over name and reality, with the aim of ensuring unity between political identity and ethical role, especially at the levels of appellation, authority, and responsibility. (Ma, 1993)

The statement that, when names are not correct, speech is not coherent; when speech is not coherent, affairs do not succeed; when affairs do not succeed, rites and music do not flourish; when rites and

music do not flourish, punishments do not fit; and when punishments do not fit, the people have nowhere to place hand or foot (Yang, 2019), shows that Confucius regards zhengming as the first task of governance. Through the establishment of a system of ethical duties, he seeks to rebuild the hierarchical order characterized by fen, in which the ruler acts as ruler, the minister as minister, the father as father, and the son as son. (Yang, 2019)

3.3 Harmony and Fen: The Final Pursuit of Confucius' View of Hierarchy

Fen and harmony are dialectically unified. Fen is the premise and foundation of harmony, while harmony is the value orientation of fen. The dialectical unity between the two determines the internal connection between the ethics of fen and the goal of harmony. The saying that harmony truly gives birth to things, whereas sameness cannot continue; using what is different to balance what is different is called harmony, and therefore things can flourish and return to it, while adding sameness to sameness exhausts all effort (Chen, 2022), indicates that sameness means an absolute unity without difference, whereas harmony is a unity that contains difference. The passage means that things can hardly develop for long under absolute uniformity, but if differences exist, things will necessarily interact because of their differences, thereby promoting their lasting existence. (Yang, 2002)

Confucius likewise accepts that there are distinctions of honor, lowliness, nobility, and baseness among Heaven, Earth, and all things, and that these distinctions form an orderly hierarchy. At the same time, he does not deny harmony as the ultimate condition of the natural order. The Analects states that, in the use of li, harmony is precious; the Way of the former kings finds its beauty here, and matters great and small follow it. Yet there are cases in which this does not work. To know harmony and seek harmony without regulating it through li is also not workable. (Yang, 2019) Harmony must be disciplined by li. If one merely knows harmony and pursues harmony while detaching it from the constraint of li, the goal of harmony will inevitably become difficult to realize. Therefore, Confucius' statement that harmony is precious in the use of li requires harmony to recognize the existence of a hierarchical order premised on li. Through li, fen can reach a proper and appropriate state, thereby constructing a hierarchical order in which closeness and distance, nobility and baseness, are clearly differentiated.

4. The Guidance of Fen for Confucius' View of Hierarchy

It is on the semantic basis that fen confirms identity, divides responsibility, and determines the attribution of power that Confucius' understanding and reconstruction of li unfold. As an inheritor and reformer of the Zhou rites, Confucius attaches great importance to the social normative function of li, and li is essentially an institutionalized expression premised on fen. Confucius stresses that the ruler should act as ruler, the minister as minister, the father as father, and the son as son. He advocates the establishment of clear behavioral norms and ethical responsibilities among different identities, which is in fact a deeper application of fen within social hierarchy and human ethical order. (Shao, 2004) His emphasis on remaining in one's proper position and not exceeding one's fen is both an ethical requirement for social roles and a response to the principles of political order in the Zhou dynasty.

4.1 Positioning Through Fen: Identity Relations in Confucius' View of Hierarchy

Within Confucian discourse, fen is not only a principle of social structure, but also the fundamental basis for the stabilization and regulation of identity roles. Confucius inherits and develops the Zhou institutional spirit of defining fen through li, emphasizing that people should fulfill corresponding responsibilities according to identity, status, kinship distance, honor, and lowliness. In the Analects, the statement that the ruler should act as ruler, the minister as minister, the father as father, and the son as son is Confucius' highly condensed expression of identity order. It emphasizes that different social roles should each fulfill their proper fen and keep to their proper position. A ruler should fulfill the responsibility of governing the state, a minister should fulfill the duty of assisting, father and son should observe the way of affection, filial piety, and fraternal respect, and elder and younger should express respect, deference, and order.

4.1.1 The Fen Between Father and Son

The relation between father and son, as the first of the five relationships, and the pattern in which the father acts as father and the son as son, are typical projections of the concept of fen in the family sphere. This ethical setting has two dimensions. A vertical role positioning based on graded difference and a horizontal distribution of asymmetrical duties together form the micro-foundation for maintaining ritual order. Shuowen Jiezi explains the character father by saying that the father is the rule and that the head of the family leads instruction; the graph combines a hand and the lifting of a staff. The meaning of father is thus similar to a measuring rule, as the father is the norm of the household and, as head of the family, takes the lead in teaching children. Graphically, the character consists of a hand holding a staff, symbolizing the father holding a teaching rod and carrying out discipline and instruction. It vividly clarifies the honored position of the father in the family and symbolizes that the father is not only the leader of the lineage, but also the controller of family order.

The Quli section of the Liji states that there should be affection between father and son, righteousness between ruler and minister, distinction between husband and wife, order between elder and younger, and trust between friends. The phrase affection between father and son refers not only to familial affection, but also to ethical gradation built upon that affection. The father is honored and the son is lowly, and this is the foundation for the operation of family order. The authority of the father comes not only from the biological favor of birth and nurture, but also from the ethical responsibility of instruction. The Xiaojing opens by stating that filial piety is the root of virtue and the source from which teaching arises. Confucianism treats filial piety as the root of virtue, and the premise of filial piety is absolute recognition of the father's authority. In this ethical structure, principles such as not disobeying the father's command and not opposing the father's words constitute basic rules for the conduct of children. Confucius also says that, while parents are alive, one should not travel far, and if one travels, one must have a fixed direction (Yang, 2019); that in life one should serve them with li, in death bury them with li, and sacrifice to them with li (Yang, 2019); and that, while the father is alive, one observes the son's intentions, and after the father dies, one observes his conduct, and if for three

years he does not change from the way of his father, he may be called filial. (Yang, 2019) These statements emphasize that children should take the wishes of their parents as their point of return, keep to their proper role, and not act rashly.

The authority relation between father and son is often reflected through the status and duties of the child. The Xue'er chapter of the Analects states that, at home, younger persons should be filial, and outside they should be fraternal, cautious and trustworthy, broadly loving the multitude, and close to ren. Filial piety is placed first among duties at home, showing that the child must first take respectful obedience to the father as the basis of obligation. The Daxue in the Liji also states that what is called ordering the family means that one cultivates oneself and then governs the family. The basis of family governance lies in self-cultivation, and the way of self-cultivation is first expressed in knowing the honor of the father and keeping to the fen of the son. More importantly, the father's authority is often embodied in moral admonition and behavioral regulation of children, as expressed in the idea that the father is the one who instructs. At the level of rights and duties, although Confucius proposes a bilateral demand of fatherly kindness and filial conduct, he places greater emphasis on the duties of the younger generation. This is often reflected in the Analects. When Ziyou asks about filial piety, Confucius says that people nowadays call being able to provide nourishment filial piety, but dogs and horses are also provided with nourishment; without reverence, how can it be distinguished? When Zixia asks about filial piety, Confucius says that demeanor is difficult. If there is work, the young do the labor, and if there is wine and food, the elders are served first. Is this enough to count as filial piety? (Yang, 2019) He also says that in serving one's parents one should remonstrate gently; if one sees that their will is not followed, one should remain respectful and not disobey, laboring without resentment. (Yang, 2019)

Confucian thought combines the ethical norm of filial piety with different levels of title, status, and hierarchy in society. This not only enriches the meaning of filial piety, but also gives it clear hierarchical differentiation. It can therefore be seen that the filial piety advocated by Confucianism is not limited to a norm of family ethics, but also carries profound political and ethical implications. In the Confucian system, filial piety is regarded as the foundation of family governance, and it further guides the formation of political order in the state. Through the emphasis on filial piety, Confucianism realizes the governance ideal of the unity of family and state, linking this family ethical norm closely with the political order of feudal hierarchy. Through this mechanism, Confucianism not only strengthens the father-son relation within the family, but also provides spiritual support for the hierarchical order of feudal society, making filial piety an important spiritual tool for maintaining and consolidating that order. (Li, 2011)

4.1.2 The Fen Between Ruler and Minister

The titles ruler and minister belong to the upper strata of society, namely the gentleman and the great person, and they often appear together. First, Confucianism takes the construction of upper-level social order as its point of departure and distinguishes ruler and minister from the perspective of fen. Ruler refers to the person who possesses absolute advantage in political power and social wealth. Thus, the

ruler is one who is to be illuminated, not one who illuminates others; the ruler is one who is to be supported, not one who supports others; the ruler is one who is to be served, not one who serves others. (Xunzi, 2011) Yet even under the general title ruler, the Confucian ideological system clearly differentiates rulers of different levels, with the Son of Heaven occupying the highest position. As the Pinyi section of the Liji states, this is how the Son of Heaven nourishes the feudal lords. This shows that the relation between the Son of Heaven and feudal lords is not equal, but is situated within a hierarchical structure of rulership and subordination. Further, below the feudal lords are great officers, whose status is lower than that of the lords. It is therefore evident that the Son of Heaven enjoys supreme honor in the political and ritual system. In the Liji, the Son of Heaven is often called king. Yet although king can refer to the Son of Heaven, it is by no means a general title that can be used interchangeably. Confucian classics clearly indicate that the Son of Heaven, feudal lords, and great officers can all be called rulers, but the boundaries among their titles are extremely clear, and different identities require corresponding appellations in different contexts. These names cannot be confused. The Fangji section of the Liji states that there are not two suns in Heaven, not two kings on earth, not two masters in the family, and not two highest honors. This emphasizes that the hierarchical order between ruler and minister must not be confused. Accordingly, when the Chunqiu records the deaths of rulers of Chu and Yue, it does not call them kings because they are not orthodox Sons of Heaven and are not permitted by the ritual system. The Fangji also says that, according to li, the ruler does not call himself Heaven and a great officer does not call himself ruler, for fear that the people will be confused. This shows that care in appellations aims to prevent disorder of names and status that would lead to confusion among the people.

The word minister stands in contrast to ruler and occupies a subordinate position, expressing a clearly graded political and ethical relation. According to the Confucian ritual system, from below the Son of Heaven, feudal lords, great officers, shi, commoners, and the people can all be included within the category of minister. The Quli section of the Liji records that the Son of Heaven calls himself minister before Heaven, feudal lords call themselves ministers before the Son of Heaven, and great officers call themselves ministers before feudal lords. When feudal lords attend court before the Son of Heaven, they must call themselves ministers, thereby making clear the meaning of subordination and the distinction of status. When Kong Yingda explains yin and yang in the Correct Meaning of the Zhouyi, he states that yang is the way of the ruler and yin is the way of the minister. Here, yang symbolizes honor and leadership, while yin represents lowliness and obedience. The implication is that the ruler occupies the honored and leading position, while the minister follows the way of subordination. (Wang, S. S., & Wang, C. Y., 2023) This symbolic system not only reflects analogical thinking between natural order and political order, but also reveals the deeper cultural logic by which Confucianism constructs hierarchical structure.

On this basis, Confucianism regulates the speech and conduct of ruler and minister through hierarchical ethical duties. Its aim is to strengthen the social structure of ordered upper and lower levels and distinct

honor and lowliness, so that ministers may consciously recognize their own status and responsibility and not harbor the mind of ruling the people. The Wangzhi section of the Liji states that one who lacks the name of minister and son but performs the corresponding affairs cannot be called a minister, and one who has the name of minister and son but does not perform the corresponding affairs likewise cannot be called a minister. This shows that consistency between title and responsibility is the foundation of the way of the minister. In addition, Confucian classics also set out systematic requirements for the model of virtue between ruler and minister. The Bayi chapter of the Analects states that the ruler employs ministers with li, and ministers serve the ruler with loyalty. It emphasizes that the ruler should treat ministers with li, while ministers should repay the ruler with loyalty, forming a mutual restraint between li and loyalty. The Daxue in the Liji also states that the gentleman takes righteousness as supreme. This indicates that the way by which a shi or gentleman serves the ruler should be guided by righteousness, without flattering power or blindly following, so as to preserve loyal and upright integrity.

It should be noted, however, that the political structure of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods had not yet formed the highly centralized system of later imperial rule. Although rulers at that time held honored positions, ministers often possessed considerable political autonomy, and the structure of power was relatively loose. The autocratic condition in which rulerly power alone was supreme had not yet appeared. Therefore, although Confucianism had already proposed the ethical requirement of loyalty, in the political reality of the time loyalty often had substantial flexibility, and its practice was not necessarily absolutized. For example, the Zuo Zhuan records in the thirtieth year of Duke Xi that Zhao Dun was condemned in connection with regicide, but from the moral standpoint of considering the altars of soil and grain, he could still receive a degree of justification. This shows the complex tension between loyalty and righteousness in actual political life. In sum, the Confucian fen between ruler and minister constructs hierarchical order not only through ritual system, appellation, and institutions, but also through an ethical normative system that internalizes this hierarchical relation as a basic rule of moral cultivation and social operation.

4.1.3 The Fen Between Elder and Younger

Connected with rulerly authority and paternal authority is elder-brother authority. As an important link in the patriarchal order, elder-brother authority not only inherits the authoritative foundation of paternal authority, but also provides institutional guarantee for the orderly transmission of rulerly authority. The institutional design of establishing the legitimate heir through the principal wife is intended precisely to clarify the legitimacy of succession, thereby ensuring the stable establishment and continuation of elder-brother authority and enabling the smooth transfer of family power. In Confucian thought, the relation between brothers is likewise incorporated into the broad category of family ethics and placed alongside ruler and minister, father and son. It expresses the foundational significance of major family relations for social order.

Confucianism takes honoring elders and subordinating the young as its basic principle and strictly

distinguishes the role positioning and ethical duties of family members. This is especially evident in the relation between brothers. The Kanggao section of the Shangshu states that among great evils, how much more serious are failure in filial piety and friendliness; the younger brother does not think of Heaven's manifest principle and therefore cannot be respectful to his elder brother, while the elder brother also does not think of the pity due to a young child and is not friendly to the younger brother. The passage proposes that the younger brother should be respectful to the elder brother, while the elder brother should be friendly and loving to the younger brother, forming an ethical structure that is mutually dependent yet hierarchically ordered. This idea is also echoed in the Zuo Zhuan. The eighteenth year of Duke Wen proposes that the father should be righteous, the mother kind, the elder brother friendly, the younger brother respectful, and the son filial, so that the inside is peaceful and the outside completed. The twenty-sixth year of Duke Zhao states that the elder brother loves and the younger brother respects; this is li. The third year of Duke Yin summarizes the Confucian six relations of compliance as follows: the ruler is righteous, the minister acts, the father is kind, the son filial, the elder brother loving, and the younger brother respectful. These discussions show that Confucianism treats elder-brother friendliness and younger-brother respect, or elder-brother love and younger-brother reverence, as important ethical norms for regulating fraternal relations. The norms of friendliness and love imposed on the elder brother are intended to allow blood affection between brothers to be fully expressed, thereby creating a family atmosphere of warmth and mutual assistance. Respect and reverence regulate the conduct of the younger brother, establish the way of honoring elders, and ensure the clarity and stability of family hierarchy. This bilateral norm both maintains the expression of kinship affection and strengthens an ordered family structure of honor and lowliness, becoming an indispensable part of the Confucian ethical system. Confucian ethics also especially emphasizes the moral duty of ti, or fraternal respect. Jia Yi explains in Xinshu Daoshu that a younger brother's respect and love for an elder brother is called ti. Here ti is connected with the word for younger brother. As the Daxue states, the younger brother is one who serves the elder, and the Wangzhi section of Xunzi likewise says that being able to serve the elder brother is called ti. Thus, ti mainly refers to the respect and affection that a younger brother should show toward an elder brother. This differs from friendship. Friendship can sometimes refer to the relation between brothers, but its meaning is broader and can refer to both brothers and friends. Ti, however, specifically refers to the attitude of the younger brother toward the elder brother and does not include the feeling of the elder brother toward the younger.

The core of Confucian fraternal ethics lies in clarifying the identity fen between brothers, establishing the ethical order that elder and younger should be ordered, and finally realizing a harmonious state in which brothers are pleased with one another. In specific ethical categories, Confucianism organically links respect for the elder brother with reverence for ancestors through ti, making it an important spiritual instrument for strengthening the status of the eldest son and constructing family order. The ethical value of ti is not limited to the family, but is extended into a behavioral norm generally applicable to social hierarchical relations.

4.2 Knowing and Keeping Fen: The Logic of Personal Moral Cultivation

In Confucius' thought, li lays the foundation for social order and ren consolidates interpersonal relations. This reflects the Confucian view of order in which virtue is primary and li is auxiliary, and in which li and law mutually inform each other. Li and ren are the outer and inner sides of one another. Li is responsible for setting names, roles, and institutions, constraining conduct through external norms. Ren is responsible for the cultivation of inner life and emotion, using moral motivation to preserve boundaries.

4.2.1 Defining Fen Through Li

In the Confucian view, li, meaning the ritual system, is the institutionalized norm of names, status, and hierarchy. The Liyun section of the Liji says that when li is fully communicated, fen is fixed, and people all love their dead and are concerned about the living. When rituals are complete and institutions are well formed, the ritual positions of all social strata become clear, and both upper levels and lower people are at peace with their proper fen. In brief, li, as the guiding principle of social governance, corrects names and regulates conduct, ensuring that when li is fully communicated, social identity and responsibility are also determined. As the Analects says, without studying li, one has no means to stand. Confucius uses this statement to warn disciples that, without learning the ritual system, one cannot establish one's own identity and standpoint. In this sense, li is not merely etiquette and ceremony. It is the cornerstone of the order of names and roles. Without li, neither individuals nor society can find their proper place.

The function of li is also reflected in the institutional thinking of establishing law through speech and assisting governance through li. Confucius states that when names are not correct, speech is not coherent; when speech is not coherent, affairs do not succeed; when affairs do not succeed, rites and music do not flourish; and when rites and music do not flourish, punishments do not fit. In other words, if names are not corrected, speech and conduct fall into disorder. Once affairs become confused, the institutions of rites and music decline, and punishments also lose their just effect. This passage reveals the logic by which li and law mutually inform each other. Only after the ritual system, namely the order of names and roles, has been established can punishments and other legal institutions function. It is thus clear that defining fen through li is not only ethical instruction, but also the premise of social governance and the implementation of law. In Confucius' image of hierarchical order, li enables people to remain in their proper positions, rectifies names, establishes law, and thereby maintains stability under Heaven.

Confucius also emphasizes the close connection between li and the idea of names and roles. Through ritual and institution, the ritual system defines the way in which ruler and minister, father and son, elder and younger, and honored and lowly should interact, enabling people to know their positions and fulfill their responsibilities. Through instruction in li, Confucius admonishes princes and nobles to govern the state through ritual deference, meaning that the ritual measure of modesty and deference should restrain power and regulate struggles of human feeling, including conflicts among feudal lords. For ordinary

people, family rituals serve as the object of learning. For example, the Dazhuan section of the Liji states that loving the kin leads to honoring ancestors, honoring ancestors leads to respecting the lineage, and loving the people leads to appropriate punishments. These classics indicate that only when family ethics is clearly hierarchical can it be extended to the political order of the state. In short, for Confucius, li is the basis of hierarchical names and roles. Defining fen through li means using standardized external institutions to stabilize relations among people, so that social operation has a basis to rely upon.

4.2.2 Consolidating Fen Through Ren

Ren is the core of internal Confucian virtue and can consolidate external boundaries within personality. Confucius often speaks in terms such as the person of ren loves others. Although the exact phrase the person of ren loves others does not directly appear in the Analects, he repeatedly emphasizes that ethical practices such as filial piety and fraternal respect are the foundation of ren. In the Xue'er chapter of the Analects, he says that the gentleman devotes himself to the root, and when the root is established, the Way is born; filial piety and fraternal respect are perhaps the root of ren. Here Confucius treats filial piety and fraternal respect as the root of ren. It is thus evident that the feelings of reverence for parents and affection for brothers form the inner core of ren. The spirit of benevolent love that moves from the inside outward enables individuals naturally to observe their own identity and responsibilities. In other words, loving the kin and honoring the honored are not simple ritual clauses, but the natural expression in each person's heart of affection for kin and elders and respect for senior persons. The Dazhuan section of the Liji states that there are six methods of mourning dress, the first being loving the kin and the second honoring the honored. Loving the kin stresses closeness among relatives, while honoring the honored stresses respect for ancestors and elders. Through the cultivation of ren, Confucius realizes the internal combination of morality and hierarchy, making differentiated ethics part of individual disposition.

The cultivation logic of ren is also reflected in attention to the personal foundation of standing in the world. Confucius tells his disciples not to worry about lacking office, but to worry about the means by which one may stand. This means that one should not be anxious about lacking an official position, but about lacking the foundation of personal standing. He teaches people first to cultivate the self and nurture virtue, establishing the foundation of personality, after which status can become stable. In this way, when individuals internally possess ren and li, they can consciously keep to their boundaries even in different identity roles. In other words, ren internalizes external ritual instruction in the heart. Practicing the root of ren and righteousness is also a way of observing hierarchical human relations in the process of becoming a person. A person who truly reveres the father and loves the elder brother naturally understands li, keeps to fen, and does not dare to overstep.

4.3 Clarifying Fen and Applying Punishment: The Mechanism for Maintaining Social Order

In the Confucian system of li and law, in order to embody the ethical principles of loving the kin and honoring the honored, the application of punishment must also take account of differences in identity

and status, so that upper social strata enjoy certain privileges in judicial practice. The legal expression of such privilege aims to highlight the rationality of the social hierarchy and the legitimacy of ritualized order. The idea that punishment does not extend upward to great officers is an important expression of this thought. Although this statement does not directly come from Confucius, its intellectual source can be traced to the Quli section of the Liji, which says that li does not descend to commoners and punishment does not ascend to great officers. This fully expresses the hierarchical spirit of the Zhou ritual and legal system, in which li governs above and punishment below. Liang Zhiping has analyzed this accurately, arguing that the statement that punishment does not ascend to great officers does not mean that the scholar-official stratum is completely exempt from punishment. Rather, on the basis of considerations of names, roles, honor, and lowliness, it emphasizes ritual treatment and preferential treatment for scholar-officials. (Xie, 2013) In judicial procedure, this privilege is particularly evident. The Xiaosikou section of the Qiuguan in the Rites of Zhou clearly states that all titled men and titled women do not personally sit in prison litigation. That is, persons of honored status, such as great officers and their wives, in principle do not need to be personally tried. If testimony must be obtained, their sons, younger relatives, or subordinate officials may appear on their behalf, so as to avoid offending their dignity of status. This institutional design reflects ritual treatment and separation for the honored. The Zhouli Zhushu further explains the reasonableness of this arrangement by saying that officials who administer prisons all possess stern authority, and there is concern that prison officials might profane the honored. (Zhuang, 2022) The exemption arrangement for the great-officer stratum in criminal litigation fully shows the respect of ancient legal institutions for the system of names, roles, and hierarchy.

In addition, the system of eight deliberations stipulated in the Xiaosikou section of the Qiuguan in the Rites of Zhou is an important example of this principle. The system requires that for people of special status, including royal relatives, old associates of the sovereign, persons of virtue, persons of talent, persons of merit, honored persons, diligent officials, and guests, guilt must first be deliberated and only then attached to punishment, as expressed in the formula of applying the eight deliberations to the state and attaching punishments. As a legislative principle, the eight deliberations not only absorb the threefold values of patriarchal ethics, political order, and moral norms, but also display the legal guarantee that Zhou society gave to hierarchy and status privilege. Confucius' idea of fen is a reasonable construction of social hierarchical order based on the principles of loving the kin and honoring the honored. This thought and the system of eight deliberations presented in the Rites of Zhou jointly constitute a typical paradigm of combined governance through li and law. They allow li and law to converge at the level of value foundation and to complement each other at the institutional level, providing the intellectual basis for later legal systems concerning status distinctions and graded punishments.

Second, the establishment of the system of concealment among relatives highlights the great importance attached to the Confucian ethic of loving the kin in the process of applying punishment.

Although Confucius does not explicitly construct a complete legal system of concealment among relatives in the transmitted texts, his ethical thought provides the fundamental theoretical basis for the later construction of related institutions. The Zilu chapter of the Analects contains a core passage that is widely regarded as the intellectual source of the idea that kin conceal one another. The Duke of She tells Confucius that in his community there is an upright person whose father stole a sheep and whose son testified against him. Confucius replies that the upright persons in his community differ from this: the father conceals for the son, the son conceals for the father, and uprightness is found in this. Confucius' statement redefines uprightness by placing kinship ethics above legal justice and establishing an ethical priority principle based on blood relation. This view, which legitimates concealment for relatives, lays the basic ethical framework for the Confucian principle of mutual concealment among kin. (Peng, 2013)

In the Qin dynasty, this idea, originally belonging to the moral sphere, began to enter the field of legal norms, marking a transition from ethical recognition to institutionalized provisions. Qin law clearly stipulates that if a child reports parents or a male or female servant reports the master, and the matter is not a public-household accusation, it should not be heard; if the accusation is nevertheless made, the accuser is punished. This establishes the prototype of mutual concealment among kin as a legal principle. The law not only forbids children from accusing parents, but also imposes punishment on reporting behavior, protecting concealment among relatives in institutional form. The Han dynasty, which inherited the Qin system, further systematized the institution of mutual concealment among kin. Especially during the Western and Eastern Han, this principle was systematically incorporated into statutes and formed a mature legal system. Mutual concealment among kin corresponded with the Han institution of deciding cases according to the Spring and Autumn Annals, reflecting the far-reaching influence of Confucian ethics on judicial practice. Dong Zhongshu was the first to propose adopting mutual concealment among kin as a principle of adjudication in trial practice, but the idea truly became a regular judicial norm during the reign of Emperor Xuan of Han. The edict of the fourth year of Diji explicitly codified mutual concealment among kin and gave it legal force, demonstrating state legislation's affirmation of traditional kinship ethics.

This not only marks the elevation of the Confucian idea of loving the kin from a moral norm to a legal principle, but also declares the law's understanding and tolerance of individuals who shield relatives out of natural kinship affection. In this context, mutual concealment among kin expands from the son concealing for the father to a bilateral duty of mutual concealment between father and son, further consolidating the ethical order inside the family and promoting the deeper Confucianization of the legal system.

5. The Historical Influence of Fen and a Comparison with Xunzi's Theory of Fen

As the internal logic of Confucius' view of hierarchy, the thought of fen continues to be inherited and deepened in the development of Confucian thought. Especially in the doctrines of Mencius and Xunzi,

fen is not weakened. Instead, in different historical contexts it displays new theoretical forms and promotes the transformation of Confucianism from ethical philosophy to the construction of social institutions. At the same time, in Xunzi, fen undergoes a shift from ethical value to a principle of social rationality, showing its theoretical adaptability and historical vitality.

5.1 The Continuation and Development of Confucius' Thought on Fen

On the basis of Confucius' ideas of defining fen through li and consolidating fen through ren, Mencius continues to strengthen the moral duty structure of loving the kin and honoring the honored, and further highlights the dual function of fen in family ethics and political ethics. In *Lilou II*, Mencius says that between father and son there is affection, between ruler and minister there is righteousness, between husband and wife there is distinction, between elder and younger there is order, and between friends there is trust. In these five relationships, each pair embodies the fundamental spirit of fen, namely establishing corresponding ethical responsibilities on the basis of differentiated identity. The sequence of loving the kin and honoring the honored forms the ethical foundation of Mencius' view of hierarchy. His fen is expressed not only in differences of status, but more importantly in differences of moral duty. Compared with Confucius, who places greater emphasis on the normativity of li, Mencius gives greater weight to the support that human feelings grounded in the goodness of human nature provide for fen. He stresses that the beginnings of ren and righteousness are rooted in the human heart. Thus fen is not merely an external arrangement of order, but also a moral structure derived from human nature and expressed in human relations. This internal sense of fen gives later Confucianism a humanistic color.

By the time of Xunzi, Confucian thought had entered a new stage of systematization and institutionalization. Xunzi continues the basic position of Confucius and Mencius that order is established through fen, but he pays more attention to embedding the idea of fen in a concrete system of social governance. In *Wangzhi*, Xunzi explicitly asks what enables humans to form communities and answers: fen. He also says that when fen is fixed there is order, and when fen is disordered there is disorder. In Xunzi's view, fen is not only a principle for maintaining social structure, but also a rational standard for judging political stability. Therefore, Xunzi elevates fen from an ethical principle of order in the age of Confucius and Mencius into the fundamental norm of state institutional operation. More importantly, Xunzi gives fen a stronger political function. He emphasizes that li is fen. In *Lilun*, he states that li and righteousness arise from fen, that when fen is fixed there is order, and that when fen disappears there is disorder. It can be seen that the li advocated by Xunzi is no longer merely a behavioral norm, but a comprehensive mechanism of social stratification, responsibility demarcation, and identity confirmation. For him, fen becomes the premise of li and the foundation of state institutional design. This transformation marks the shift of fen from a moral-ethical principle to a principle of institutional construction, completing the movement from ethical reasoning to legal and institutional reasoning.

5.2 The Rationalized Turn in Xunzi's Thought on Fen

Xunzi's thought on fen forms an important theoretical branch within Confucianism because he gives

fen a clearer practical institutional function and displays a strong rationalist tendency. Compared with Confucius, who uses fen to establish virtuous relations and ritual conduct among people, Xunzi takes fen as the basic device for maintaining the reasonable operation of the whole social system. His fen appears as the rationalized division of identity, responsibility, power, and even resource allocation. Confucius emphasizes that the ruler should act as ruler, the minister as minister, the father as father, and the son as son, with the aim of maintaining behavioral propriety within hierarchical ethics. His concern lies in the moral self-consciousness of each individual, namely knowing and keeping fen, and internalizing it as virtue through li. Xunzi, by contrast, turns toward the institutional production of fen. He advocates using institutions to clearly distinguish ruler and minister, noble and base, worthy and unworthy, and he stresses that human nature is bad and must rely on ritual, righteousness, law, and standards for correction and the maintenance of order. Therefore, Xunzi's fen is based on a deep recognition of human nature and social complexity, and it has a stronger defensive and rational-regulatory character. This is especially evident in his thought on communal governance. Xunzi treats fen as the basis that distinguishes humans from birds and beasts and makes it possible for them to form communities. Wangzhi states that humans can form communities, whereas they cannot; what enables humans to form communities is fen. This way of thinking, which treats fen as the fundamental premise of social organization, has already surpassed the family ethical framework of Confucius' time and expanded to the level of state governance, forming a systematic social philosophy. In addition, Xunzi goes further in combining fen with law. In *Zhenglun* he proposes that li is fen, fen is principle, and principle is the root of order. In his view, fen is not only the confirmation of hierarchy, but also the necessary premise for the operation of political commands, the clarification of authority and responsibility, and the ordering of institutions. (Kong & Zhang, 2023) This clearly contrasts with Confucius' path of cultivating popular virtue and transforming the popular mind through rites and music. It may be said that Confucius gives priority to virtue with li as auxiliary, whereas Xunzi tends more toward giving priority to law with li as auxiliary.

Overall, on the basis of inheriting the spirit of Confucius' fen, Xunzi's thought on fen completes an institutional and rational transformation of the Confucian idea of hierarchy. This transformation provides theoretical support for the construction of the ritual system in the feudal dynasties after Qin and Han and lays the foundation for the transition of Confucian thought from ethical instruction to political governance.

6. Conclusion

The construction of Confucius' view of hierarchy does not arise from blind maintenance of hierarchical difference, nor is it aimed at consolidating the interests of privileged strata. It is based on a deep insight into the order of Heaven and humanity, justice in names and roles, and social harmony. In his system of thought, fen is not only the foundation of the order of human relations, but also a meta-principle for political governance and the design of legal institutions. Defining fen through li, consolidating fen

through ren, correcting fen through names, and maintaining fen through punishment together constitute Confucius' moral-institutional structure for sustaining social order. This fen is not a compulsory shackle of hierarchy, but an ethicalized system of graded difference. It is not a tool for oppressing the individual, but a definition of role and responsibility. Fen thus becomes an important mediator in Confucian thought for achieving coordination and unity between individual and society and between family and state. In contemporary society, equality has become a main theme of the age, and hierarchy appears to have been comprehensively deconstructed. Yet if one sets aside the fixed assumption that hierarchy is identical with inequality and returns to the internal logic of Confucius' thought, one may find that his view of fen contains structural rationality and moral justice expressed in harmony without sameness. In an age that emphasizes both rule of law and ethics, the Confucian idea of fen can provide a reflective dimension and theoretical resource for modern social governance, the reconstruction of family ethics, and identity politics. The modern reinterpretation of Confucius' view of hierarchy, especially with fen as its pivot, is therefore an important path for reactivating the Confucian thought of order.

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