

Liu Zongyuan's Ritual-Legal Philosophy and Approach to Local Governance

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Abstract

Liu Zong-yuan (773-819) is celebrated as one of the “Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties.” This literary fame, however, has overshadowed the political achievements of his civic career as well as his noteworthy legislative experience. Of the considerable academic research which has been undertaken on Liu, the majority focuses on his literary attainments while only a fraction examines his experience as a statesman and legislator. This article, in contrast, seeks to investigate Liu's ideas on local governance and legislation in order to gain a clearer understanding of his legal philosophy.

Liu opposed the common practice of administering justice in strict accordance with the natural calendar, by which rewards were bestowed in spring and summer and punishments meted out in fall and winter. He also dismissed the notion of an anthropomorphic Heaven which had the will and ability to reward or punish his fellow humans. He urged for a return to governance by the Confucian “golden mean,” and argued that Confucian rites and codified laws—though divergent in function—served a common purpose: to prevent social unrest.

As governor of Liuzhou, he took the teaching of such rites as his guiding principle. Whether he was busy with the renovation of a Confucian or Buddhist temple, he always sought to complement his governance by

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moral example with the practice and observance of rituals, eventually earning him the love and esteem of Liuzhou locals.

In his writings, through analysis of contemporaries' experience in local administration, Liu sketches out his own ideal form of government: one which combines the Confucian order with established legal norms; observes rituals; enforces laws; levies taxes; and ensures fair legal proceedings. A government, or statesman, who can do all of the above while winning the respect and admiration of residents, in Liu's eyes, is the model to which all local officials should aspire.

Keywords: Tang Dynasty, Liu Zong-yuan, Local Governance, Legal Philosophy, Confucian rites, anthropomorphic Heaven