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The François Quesnay Problem: Laozi or Confucius, where his economic thoughts come from?

Li Tingfang

China Three Gorges University

ABSTRACT

François Quesnay was called “Confucius of Europe” because of his admiration of Confucius. The core of economic thoughts of François Quesnay were “law of nature” and “inaction”. However, “law of nature” and “inaction” were the core thoughts of Taoism founded by Laozi. Although Confucius also mentioned “Tao” and “inaction”, the core thoughts of Confucianism were morality and hierarchy. Laozi, François Quesnay criticized, or Confucius, François Quesnay adored, where his economic thoughts come from? This is just like a person walked into a shop of civilization because he was attracted by the product of designer A there, and took away a tool that he thought was designed by designer A but actually was by designer B. Afterwards, he showed his appreciation for the tool and designer A to his friend. Later, this tool was used by his friend and created great value. This may be a harmless misunderstanding, but if we know the truth, can we give designer B the credit he deserves and create more value with his tools?

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*Correspondence to Author:

Li Tingfang

China Three Gorges University

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About François Quesnay

François Quesnay [4 June 1694 – 16 December 1774], a French economist and physician of the Physiocratic school, the author of *Le Despotisme de la Chine* in 1767, was known for his writings on Chinese politics and society. His thought of “law of nature” and “Nothing” influenced Adam Smith’s policy orientation in his magnum opus, *An Inquiry Into The Nature and Causes of The Wealth of Nations*, which is one of the origins of western economics. If I am asked what is justice, and if I answer on the basis of reason, I shall say that what is justice is the supreme law of nature, as expressly acknowledged by the light of reason, what belongs to a man or to himself. ... The so-called natural rights of the individual, in reality, can be understood as limited to a part of the various things suitable for human enjoyment. ... For these reasons it is our duty, in the case of man in the natural order, to avoid, as far as possible, the evils which we are able to encounter, only the laws of the duties of the causes which act. The violation of the law of nature is the commonest and most general cause of the actual evil which befalls people. ... And the rational man, in order not to violate these laws and these supreme laws, in order to obtain the greatest possible benefit, her family has the privilege to examine it in detail and know him. Natural law can be objects, also can be moral ... the above two laws together, which is what is called a natural law.¹ He thought the best thing to do was to do nothing, also named inaction. The power to enact laws and levy taxes is often a source of disorder and of endless disputes between monarch and people. ... The legislative power, so often the object of contention between the sovereign and the people, originally belonging neither to the sovereign nor to the people, is rooted in the supreme will of the creator, and in all that is best for mankind, the actual rules. ... So for sure, at the fundamental rules of the legislative power is there can be no argument, he can't belong to

anyone, can only belong to god, god in the whole system of the world set up everything, and to make a provision in advance, people will only make a mess here, only to comply with the laws of nature, to eliminate they should avoid the chaos phenomena. ... Was it not by obeying the laws of nature that the Chinese empire grew long and prosperous?² The dauphin of France once bemoaned to Quesnay the difficulties of the office of king (which he was not destined to live to assume). “I do not see,” said Quesnay, “that it is so troublesome.” “What then,” asked the dauphin, “would you do if you were king?” Said Quesnay, “Nothing.” Asked who would govern, Quesnay replied cryptically, “The Law.” He clearly meant the natural law.³ The phrase *laissez-faire*, coined by fellow Physiocrat Jacques Claude Marie Vincent de Gournay [28 May 1712 – 27 June 1759], is postulated to have come from Quesnay's writings on China.

François Quesnay was an advocate of Confucius. He highly evaluated Confucius: The greatest veneration for this philosopher is preserved in China. He is looked upon as the master and the doctor of the Empire, his works have such great authority that it would be a punishable crime if one were to make the slightest change there. As soon as we cite a passage from his doctrine, all disputes cease, and the most obstinated scholars are obliged to surrender. There are in almost all the cities of the Palace species or the mandarins and the graduates assemble in certain times of the year to make their homework to Confucius. In the country that gave birth to this famous philosopher, the Chinese have raised several monuments that are so many public testimonies of their gratitude. Hi-Tsong, King of the Tartars, wanting to give public marks of the esteem that he was making letters and those who cultivated them, went to visit the room of Confucius and gave him, in the Chinese way, the same honors that one gives to the Kings. The courtiers could not taste that their master honored in this way a

¹ François Quesnay *Natural Rights (In English)*

² François Quesnay *Le Despotisme De La Chine*

³ James Edward Le Rossignol *Economics For Everyone: An Introduction To Social Economics*

man whose State had not according to them, nothing very illustrious, showed him their surprise. "If he does not deserve these honors by his quality," replied the Tartar monarch, he is worthy of the excellent doctrine he taught.⁴ However, there comes a question — Whether the thoughts of François Quesnay which come from China come from Confucius according to his own cognition?

About Laozi and Confucius

The Oriental civilization, situated beside and drawing sustenance from a river, which was a kind of agricultural civilization, represented by the Chinese civilization. I Ching , an ancient Chinese divination text and the oldest of the Chinese classics believed to have been written by King Wen of Zhou, was a stream of Chinese traditional culture, which influenced Laozi and Confucius. The word of "Tao" appeared four times in this short and abstruse book. The fourth NINE, undivided, shows us one followed. Though he can obtain, there will be evil. If he can follow Tao and be sincere, making that evident, into what error will he fall? ... Fu indicates that there will be free course and progress (in what it denotes). (The subject of it) finds no one to distress him in his exits and entrances; friends come to him, and no error is committed. He will return and repeat Tao. In seven days comes his return. There will be advantage in whatever direction movement is made. Laozi, the author of *Tao Te Ching* and the founder of Taoism. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism. Both Laozi and Confucius lived during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period that was belongs to the Zhou Dynasty, when there exist frequent wars. Laozi was born before Confucius. The core of thought of Laozi is Tao. The word of "Tao" appeared seventy-seven times in his *Tao Te Ching*. He described Tao in *Tao Te Ching*: Tao that can be described is not universal and eternal Tao. ... Human are in the law of Di(earth), Di is in the law of Tian(heaven), Ti is in the law of Tao, Tao is in the law of

nature. ... Tao is always in the state of the inaction but everything is under its action. He did not give Tao a clear definition, on the contrary, he said: Tao (The Way) that can be spoken of is not the Constant Tao' ... The ancient Tao cultivators were subtle and mysterious. They were of immeasurable profundity. In policy orientation, he advocated do nothing. I act effortlessly with the Way of Tao, Thus, people transform themselves naturally. I love tranquility and peace, Thus, people naturally follow the right Way. I do not exhaust people with labor, Thus, people naturally are wealthy. I have no personal desires, Thus, people naturally are innocent and simple. He had his own unique wisdom in governance. Ruling a great nation is like frying small fish. ... The ancient Tao cultivators, did not lead people to acquire knowledge to be tricky, but to guide them to restore their simplicity and innocence. ... When people do not respect the authority, there shall be great misfortune. The ideal society described by Laozi was small, simple, unconnected: An ideal nation is small and with few people. Although there are abundant weapons, there is no need for the use. Let the people cherish their life and not pursue after fame and wealth, so that they have no intention to move to faraway places. Although there are boats and carriages, no one will ride them. Although there are weapons and armors, there is no occasion to display them. Let the people return to the ancient simple life where knotting ropes were used to record every event. People would then enjoy the simple food, simple clothing, and be contented with a simple life. And they shall live happily with the traditional customs. Neighbors of the nations overlook one another in the near distance. The barks of dogs and crowing of cocks can be heard. Yet people are so contented that they enjoy their life without ever visiting each other.⁵

Confucius was an advocate of King Wen of Zhou and *I Ching*. Confucius was fond of *The Ching* in his later years. He organized XIANG、XI、SHUO

⁴ François Quesnay *Le Despotisme De La Chine*

⁵ Laozi *Tao Te Ching*

GUA、WEN YAN for it. He read it so repeated that the string of bamboo slips of it broke many times.⁶ He expounded his understanding of Tao. The word of “Tao” appeared sixty-one times in XIANG、XI、SHUO GUA、WEN YAN believed to have been organized by Confucius. Yin and Yang compose Tao.⁷ And he said: If getting Tao in the morning, I would die in the evening without regret.⁸ He embodied Tao as Tao of Tian (heaven), Di (earth), Jun-zi (gentlemen), women, Chen(liagemen) etc. He emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity. What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.⁹The core of thought of Confucius is Ren. The word of “Ren” appeared one hundred and five times in *The Analects*, which was a collection of sayings and ideas attributed to Confucius and his disciple. In political orientation, he wished to restore feudal hierarchy of Zhou Dynasty. He thought ideal king should be virtuous like Yao, Shun and ideal liegemen should be Jun-zi. He also mentioned the concept of do nothing: He did nothing and all was well ordered – this would describe Shun, would it not? What did he do? He simply composed himself with reverence and sat facing due south.¹⁰ The ideal society described by Confucius was public. When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. Males had their proper work, and females had their homes. (They accumulated) articles (of value), disliking

that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. (The), laboured) with their strength, disliking that it should not be exerted, but not exerting it (only) with a view to their own advantage. In this way (selfish) schemings were repressed and found no development. rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open, and were not shut. This was (the period of) what we call the Grand Union.¹¹The ideal society they pursued was backward. Laozi opposed the political thoughts of Confucianism. He said: Nature may seem not Ren to regard all beings as a traditional straw dog for sacrifice. And likewise with a saint, he may seem not Ren to regard people as a traditional straw dog for sacrifice.... Transcend the saint’s teaching and conceal one’s wisdom for potential use, shall benefit the people a hundred fold. Extend kindness to its ultimate and then polish to refine one’s righteousness shall help the people or regain filial piety and compassion. Employ one’s subtle true nature with exquisiteness.

The thoughts of their followers were worthy investigating. Zhuang Zhou, another representative figure of Taoism after Laozi. He inherited and developed the thought of inaction from Laozi. Mencius, the follower of Confucius, put forward to benevolent governance. And Xun Kuang, another follower of Confucius, put forward to ways of King. The followers of Taoism and Confucianism both turned their eyes to politics. The difference was that Zhuang Zhou wished kings not to fight but Mencius and Xun Kuang wished kings to be good. Their had different views on human nature and proposed contradictory methodologies. Confucianism attached importance to teaching and opened many private schools, having larger impact than Taoism. Han Fei, the student of Xun Kuang, was the founder of Legalism, which greatly influenced the development of the State of Qin

⁶ Sima Qian *Records Of The Grand Historian*

⁷ ZHOU YI · XI CI I

⁸ *The Analects*

⁹ *The Analects*

¹⁰ *The Analects Of Confucius* 2015 (Version 2.21) R.Eno *An Online Teaching Translation*

¹¹ *The Book of Rites*

and establishment of Qin Dynasty because its methodology made the State of Qin richer and stronger. The burning of books and burying of scholars of the Qin Dynasty caused the loss of many philosophical treatises of Taoism and Confucianism except Legalism. Taoism dominated and the religion of Taoism appeared in the Western Han Dynasty until Emperor Wu of Han placed Confucianism, which was not unmixed Confucianism but Confucianism as its external and Legalism as its internal with the blender of Taoism, the thought of School of Yin-yang etc., in a dominant position, which conducted to the unification of thought and power. Overly, Confucianism has absorbed Taoism in its development process. In other words, these Schools of Thought learnt and absorbed each other, although Confucianism was mainstream of Chinese traditional thought. And Zhu Xi and other Confucians developed Confucianism and pushed it, which absorbed new contents, to a higher status in Song Dynasty. It is worth noting that Confucianism was called Li Xue ("rationalist" school) or Tao Xue at that time. It was interesting to Xin Xue ("idealist " school) founded by Lu Jiuyuan at that time, which was opposed to Li Xue, absorbed the thought of Taoism. It was very easy for someone influenced by Chinese thought and culture at that time to promote Confucianism and belittle other thoughts because he does not know Confucianism he learnt which was in exclusive status absorbed thoughts from other schools. You should not blame him because the cognition was formed by the social environment.

Here were two clues of Taoism and Confucianism which were based on *I Ching* in the Zhou Dynasty. Taoism, founded by Laozi in the Spring and Autumn Period, inherited by Zhuang Zhou in the Warring States Period, pullulated into a religion in the Western Han Dynasty. The core of Taoism was Tao; the policy orientation of it was inaction. Tao, in my opinion, was laws of nature. The inaction, in the perspective of public power versus personal right, was liberalism. Confucianism, founded by

Confucius who also mentioned Tao and inaction in the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, inherited by Mencius whose thought core was benevolent governance and Xun Kuang whose thought core was ways of King, influencing the founder of legalism, pushed into a dominant position by Dong Zhongshu through absorbing thoughts of Legalism and Taoism in the Western Han Dynasty, pushed into a higher status by Zhu Xi through absorbing thoughts of Taoism in Song Dynasty. The core of Confucianism was morality; the policy orientation of it was hierarchy.

Jesuit missionaries and Chinese culture

A Italian merchant named Marco Polo set off for Asia in 1271 and he returned to Venice with many riches and treasures in 1295. *The Travels of Marco Polo*, described to Europeans the wealth and great size of China, inspiring colonists, merchants and missionaries etc. to visit China. After China was discovered by Europeans, a large number of missionaries came to China. After Jesuit missionaries entered China, they learned to appreciate the Chinese culture made them known in Europe. The mainstream of Chinese thought and culture was Confucianism at that time. Therefore, what Jesuit missionaries contacted were mainly Neo-Confucianism. They adored the founder of Confucianism: Confucius highly because the important attention to The Four Books and Five Classics most of which were organized by Confucius. The works of Confucius were first translated into European languages in the 16th century during the late Ming dynasty. The first known effort was by Michele Ruggieri, who returned to Italy in 1588 and carried on his translations while residing in Salerno. Matteo Ricci started to report on the thoughts of Confucius, and a team of Jesuits—Prospero Intorcetta, Philippe Couplet, and two others—published a translation of several Confucian works and an overview of Chinese history in Paris in 1687. François Noël completed the Confucian canon at Prague in 1711, with more scholarly treatments of the other works and the

first translation of the collected works of Mencius. The last Jesuits in China were finally expelled because of religious reasons in 1721. Jesuits including French in China returned their homeland with a large number of Chinese classics, especially Confucian classics. Thus, a number of Confucian classics was known to French.

Their Latin works popularized the name "Confucius" and had considerable influence on the Deists and other Enlightenment thinkers. Those enlightenment philosophers who tried to destroy the social structure and theology that supported absolute monarchy or metaphysical ethics were surprised to find ¹² "Confucius had thought the same thoughts in the same manner, and fought the same battles" ¹³ Confucius was evaluated as: One might say that the moral system of this philosopher is infinitely sublime, but that it is at the same time simple, sensible, and drawn from the purest sources of natural reason... Never has Reason, deprived of Divine Revelation, appeared so well developed nor with so much power. ¹⁴Voltaire [21 November 1694 – 30 May 1778], a French Enlightenment writer, historian and philosopher, adored Confucius as a sage, saying "He was a wise administration, teaching the laws of past."¹⁵ "Without assumption he explored the mind, Unveiled the light of reason to mankind. " ¹⁶ Confucius has no interest in falsehood; he did not pretend to be prophet; he claimed no inspiration; he taught no new religion; he used no delusions; flattered not the emperor under whom he lived... ¹⁷He described China as "the most extended and best governed kingdom of the world", ¹⁸"the wisest and best governed country in the world"¹⁹, "a free and enjoyable country"²⁰. However, he distorted Taoism, in the way that he used Chinese religious ideology as a tool to criticize the contemporary reality of France and Europe. In fact, Voltaire rarely

mentioned Laozi, and when he did mention Taoism, it was usually in a negative context. Voltaire's bias toward reason and Deism and rejection of the supernatural was what led to his negative evaluation of Laozi or Taoism. He said: Some time before the era of Confucius, Laokiu had introduced a sect that believed in evil spirits, enchantments, and other delusions. ²¹If Taoism is divided into philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism, the Laozi (Laokiu) mentioned by Voltaire is the Laozi espoused in religious Taoism. Voltaire argued that the sect of Loakiu introduced "superstition" to the public. It seems that he was unaware of the *Tao Te Ching*, which is not irrelevant to this "superstition."

François Quesnay, born in the same year as Voltaire, only mentioned Laozi once in his *Le Despotisme de la Chine* with criticism: One of these intrusentous religions forms the sect of Laokuim; It has increasing more and more with time and nothing is less surprising. A religion protected by princes and by the great, of which she flattered the passions; a religion avidly adopted by a cowardly and superstitious people; a religion seduced by false prestige who triumph over ignorance, which has always believed in sorcerers, is a religion of all countries; could it fail to spread? Even today there are few people of the people who have some faith in the irreligious Ministers of this sect; they are called to heal the sick and chase away the clever spirits.

The François Quesnay Problem

François Quesnay adored Confucius highly and belittle Laozi improperly. However, the core of his economic thoughts were law of nature and do nothing which were the core of Taoism founded by Laozi and merely mentioned by Confucius. The problem arises: Laozi or Confucius, where his economic thought come from? As far as I can see, the answer is Laozi. Laozi was born in BC 571.²² Confucius was

¹² Tae-Hyeon Song *Voltaire 'S View Of Confucius*

¹³ *Reichiwein 77*

¹⁴ *Introductory Exposition*

¹⁵ Voltaire *The Manner And Spirit Of Nations*

¹⁶ Voltaire *Philosophical Dictionary*

¹⁷ Voltaire

¹⁸ Voltaire *Philosophical Dictionary*

¹⁹ Voltaire *Philosophical Dictionary*

²⁰ Voltaire *The Travels of Scarmentado*

²¹ Voltaire *Essay on the Manner and Spirit of Nations*

²² Hu Shi

born in BC 551 and he visited Laozi when Laozi culture.

was an official historian.²³ And the frequency of "Tao" in *Tao Te Ching* higher than *XIANG, XI, SHUO GUA, WEN YAN*. The followers of Taoism still emphasized Tao; but the followers of Confucius mainly focused on morality. The development of Confucianism is inseparable from Taoism. After Confucius, especially after Dong Zhongshu, Confucianism absorbed the some thought from Taoism. Voltaire appreciated the thought of morality and rationalism of Confucianism probably because morality was inoffensive but missing in France and rationalism was the theme that he promoted. Maybe he misunderstood that rationalism was the theme of Li Xue ("rationalist" school) just like he misunderstood Laozi wished to found religious Taoism. As for François Quesnay, what he appreciated was law of nature and inaction owe to Laozi, maybe he did not know his economic thoughts came not from Confucius, but from Laozi who he misunderstood and criticized. Perhaps he should rather be called "Laozi of Europe" than "Confucius of Europe". The development of Confucianism is inseparable from Taoism and the spread of Taoism is inseparable from Confucianism.

This is just like a person walked into a shop of civilization because he was attracted by the product of designer A there, and took away a tool that he thought was designed by designer A but actually was by designer B. Afterwards, he showed his appreciation for the tool and designer A to his friend. Later, this tool was used by his friend and created great value. This may be a harmless misunderstanding, but if we know the truth, can we give designer B the credit he deserves and create more value with his tools?

Thoughts may be innovated in the process of inheritance, and culture may be misunderstood in the process of spread. The logic behind this is the need of The Times. It is worth noting that the attitude a country towards its own culture can influence the cognition other countries on their



²³ Sima Qian *Records Of The Grand Historian*