

Was Guan Zhong (管仲) a man of ren (仁)?

Guan Zhong (管仲; ca. 720BC-645BC) was the minister who assisted Duke Huan of Qi so that the State of Qi became the leading state (hegemon) during the Spring and Autumn Period of ancient China. But Confucius apparently had harsh things to say about him:

“Guan Zhong is a man of small calibre! (管仲 小人也! 管仲無道也)” (論語 3.22)

Someone asked clarification.

“You mean, he was frugal? 管仲無道也”

Confucius did not mince his words. He made scathing remarks about Guan Zhong's staggering wealth. According to Confucius, Guan Zhong did not know Li 恥 either.

He had three residences, each complete with a full array of domestic staff. How could he be frugal? Only a ruler can have a gate screen. But Guan Zhong had one. Only when a ruler entertains another ruler, can he have a cup stand. But Guan Zhong had a cup stand. If he knew Li, who didn't?

However, regarding the question of ethical integrity (仁), Confucius shows a very interesting response. Was Guan Zhong a man of ethical integrity? That was the question posed by Confucius' students.

Zi Gong said, “Guan Zong lacked ethical integrity, did he not? When Duke Huan of Qi had his brother Jiu killed, Guan Zhong was unable to commit suicide. He instead served Duke Huan as his minister.” (論語 14.17)

Jiu was the elder brother of Duke Huan. Guan Zhong was originally serving Jiu. When there was an armed conflict between brothers who were competing for the throne of Qi, Guan Zhong attempted to assassinate Duke Huan. But the attempt was unsuccessful and Jiu had to flee to a neighbouring state. When Duke Huan eventually came to the throne of Qi, he put pressure on the ruler of the neighbouring state (who harbours Jiu) to have Jiu killed. Jiu was duly killed and his body was pickled and presented to Duke Huan. When a ruler is killed, it was 'appropriate' and perhaps 'ethical' for his minister such as Guan Zhong to commit suicide. For instance, minister Shao Hu who had been serving Jiu committed suicide when Jiu was killed. But Guan Zhong not only not killed himself but somehow enlisted the help of his close friend Bao Shuya (包叔牙) who was an aide to Duke Huan. Bao recommended Guan Zhong to Duke Huan and Guan Zhong became his minister. Guan Zhong must have had a superb skill of winning the mind of his former enemy. Zi Gong, however, denounces Guan Zhong's apparent lack of 'ethical integrity'. However, Confucius replied as follows:

Guan Zhong acted as prime minister to the duke Huan, made him leader of all the princes, and united and rectified the whole kingdom. Down to the present day, the people enjoy the gifts which he conferred. Without Guan Zhong, we should now be wearing our hair unbound, and the lappels of our coats buttoning on the left side. Will you require from him the small fidelity of common men and common women, who would commit suicide in a stream or ditch, no one knowing anything about them? (公冶长 , 14.17)

Zi Lu asked a similar question. Confucius' reply was even more definitive.

*When the duke Huan caused his brother Jiu to be killed, Shao Hu died with his master but Guan Zhong did not die. May not I say that he was lacking ethical integrity?
The Duke Huan assembled all the princes together without even*

using weapons of war and chariots – it was all through the influence of Guan Zhong. Have ethical integrity like him! Such ethical integrity as his! 管仲之器，天下無雙。 (管子, 14.16)

There is another passage where Confucius extols Guan Zhong's great virtue.

Someone asked about Zi Chan. Confucius replied. 'He was kind.' Someone asked about Zi Xi. Confucius said, 'Oh dear, don't ask me about him. Not him!' Someone asked about Guan Zhong. Confucius said, 'A great man, indeed. He grabbed the town of Pian which had three hundred households from the Bo family. The villagers only managed to have coarse meals, but no one had bad feelings until the end (even when they had no teeth from old age).'

What then? All is well that ends well? The end justifies the means? All is forgiven as long as you get the result? Definitely not! There are simply too many passages where Confucius emphasised that the process counts, rather than the result. Even if you cannot hope to have a result, you must nevertheless endeavour in all earnest.

Ethical integrity, morality is far more complex. It cannot be simply explained in black on white. It is certainly not a matter of some "inflexible" principle. It is not something that can be approached from dogmatic or absolute terms.

A good deal of common sense and flexibility would put you on the right path, provided that you have the right training and the right frame of mind – provided also that you have the determination to improve yourself constantly.