The Historical Learning Methods from Machiavelli's Florentine Histories

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Abstract: As an Italian political thinker and historian in the Middle Age, Machiavelli explored the reasons for the decline and weakness of Florence in his book titled "*Florentine Histories*" by describing the basic historical facts of Florence. In his historical narrative, he inserted his own views on saving the country, hoping that modern people could learn from historical lessons, jump out of the historical cycle, and save the country. The book is full of humanism, and through vivid and popular writing, it intensively expresses the viewpoint of "integrating politics and history", making a great contribution to the research of future generations' history.

Keywords: Machiavelli, Florentine Histories, political and historical integration

1.   Introduction

During the middle-age, when most European countries united themselves, the Italian peninsula was still divided. It was because Italy did not have a highly centralized monarchy, which meant that there was not a powerful emperor to rule the country. What's more, the long struggle between the imperial power and the Pope resulted in the Pope not having the power to unite Italy. These factors led to Italian cities maintaining a relatively independent state.

Machiavelli's home city, Florence, was one of Italy's many divided cities. As the city with the earliest budding capitalist relationship, Florence also suffered from "the continuous division of the citizens" [1]. Whether it was between the common aristocracy, political parties, or big families, Florence was engaged in the struggle between different parties at different periods. It was in such a chaotic age that Machiavelli began to seek the correct path of national salvation from the chaos. He was born in a declining aristocratic family in Florence. After the Medici family was defeated and the Republic of Florence was established, he served as the second Secretary of State of the Republic [2]. During this period, Machiavelli completed the accumulation of his cognition of reality, and continued to digest it for a long time. Finally, these thoughts congealed into a crystallization of thought that influenced later generations.

2. Machiavelli's History of Florence

In addition to his experience of Florence's chaotic period, Machiavelli's early experiences were also important in shaping his later ideas. Machiavelli began to learn Latin from his teacher at the age of seven, and was very interested in classical books, especially *Livy's History of Rome*. We can see from here that Machiavelli had the habit of reading history from an early age. He was familiar with the

history of ancient Rome and the political views of Cicero. The accumulation of knowledge in his early years laid the foundation for the expression of his political and historical propositions in his later years. Forty years later, he published a book based on *Livy's History of Rome*, in which Machiavelli used historical narratives to convey his personal advice on realpolitik. In his book, he extensively employed the past to satirize the present, and this idea is also reflected in the *Florentine Histories*.

Machiavelli himself, as a historian with great interest in history and abundant knowledge, was given the position of historian by the Medici family in his later years, hoping to record the history of Florence. However, in this history book mixed with a lot of his own suggestions and views on realpolitik, he explored ways to save his country by writing history books and expressing political views.

Because Italy was the center of the Renaissance movement, Florence also had a very strong humanistic atmosphere. Machiavelli spent his early life in the heyday of the Renaissance and was deeply influenced by humanism, which can be seen in his books. *Florentine Histories* is colored with strong patriotism. The book is full of emotion, and the description of citizens and patriots who maintained the political order of the country is positive. By quoting the speeches of the people's representatives at that time, readers can empathize with the sympathies of the exiled patriots, which promotes patriotism in a kind of unreal literary way. Patriotism is one of Machiavelli's grandest and ultimate propositions of his politics.

Machiavelli's life was bumpy. Although he had strong patriotic feelings, he was unable to serve the country due to various practical factors, which made it impossible for him to express his political views, and finally expressed them through historical works. Most scholars believe that Machiavelli was a politician in every sense of the word. In his fourteen years of political career, the greatest contribution he made was to deepen his understanding of the monarchy and to talk about politics from the perspective of pure humanity.

However, as a historian, his contribution to the study of history is far greater than his contribution to the historical record of Florence. In short, under the influence of multiple factors, such as the chaotic political situation, the accumulation of classical historical knowledge and the infiltration of humanistic thought, Machiavelli formed his unique view of history and made outstanding historical achievements, which had a crucial impact on the research path of subsequent historians.

3.   Historical Learning Methods in the History of Florence

3.1.   Machiavelli's Historical Cycle Theory

After decades of observation of chaos and order in Florence, Machiavelli began to explore a set of rough cognition of the law of social development. He believed that history was a constant cycle. Florence needed to break out of the cycle and deal with government affairs according to the changes of time.

From the constant struggle in Florence, he observed: "It can be seen that, under the rule of the change of rise and fall, the regions often from rule to chaos, and then from chaos to rule. For the nature of human affairs does not permit regions to go all the way on a smooth course; When they reach the perfect condition, they soon fade away; Likewise, when they have become so disorganized and so depressed that they cannot go down, they must begin to rise again" [1]. In the chaos of just a few decades, Florence was ruled successively by the aristocracy, the upper common people and the common people in the struggle of various classes.

However, no matter which class gained the dominant power of the government, the main political activities were aimed at safeguarding their own rule rather than protecting national interests. In short, it only focused on individual rather than collective interests. This trait is not unique to the aristocracy,

but any class, as long as they become the top. This is because "the arrogance and ambition of the aristocracy is not dead, but only transferred from them to some of the common people" [1].

When Machiavelli talked about the class struggle that led to the constant chaos and internal strife in Florence, he did not target the aristocracy, but blamed it on the selfish feelings of people themselves, which was consistent with the actual reality of Florence and based on his own experience of the historical facts. When describing it, Machiavelli also called it a "law of rise and fall", believing that it is a kind of cycle in a sense, a repetition of past history. In fact, although this "historical cycle theory" ignores the continuous development of society and objective economic conditions, it can be called a leap forward in the study of medieval history. The reason for this progress stems from Machiavelli's purpose in reaching this conclusion. When author wrote a history book, he had a political purpose. He wanted posterity to recognize the correct way to save his country. As Machiavelli put it in the speech of a righteous commenter recorded in his book: "I have not been tired of telling you about these corrupt practices and the series of divisions that have taken place throughout history, not to frighten you, but to make clear the root causes of these evils" [1].

That is to say, the event itself and its tragic results are not the purpose of expression, nor the key point. What is noteworthy is the cause of these events. Only by solving the root problem could Florence get out of the "Mobius ring" of infinite circulation and realize progress. If viewed in terms of "historical circulation theory", Machiavelli's focus is not on the "historical circulation theory" expressed by his discovery, but on the hope that readers, contemporary or future Florentines, could jump out of the historical cycle and implement corresponding countermeasures according to the actual social reality. Based on the cognition of historical facts in the past, Machiavelli concluded that people should learn from the experience of history and summarize the changes that people should make according to the "quarrels and disagreements" in history to avoid the "cycle" again. His intellectual advance was that Machiavelli did not merely record the history of Florence, but was able to draw from it a list of events that were organically related, and to find a set of universal laws among them. His judgment of history is not only about emotionalize, preference for characters, or condemnation or praise purely out of his own political standpoint. He views historical events from a more macro and larger perspective, even if the reason he wants to convey political ideas is out of his strong patriotic passion, also was because he wanted to find a way for Florence to save itself. This kind of historical thinking mode, which sees the development law from history and guides behavior through history, is very worthy of adoption by later generations [3].

In essence, Machiavelli took history as a carrier to express his political views, analyzed historical events through the statement of historical events, and came up with a method to solve the dilemma, which in turn played a guiding role in the political activities of modern society. While he was full of love for history and had sufficient historical knowledge, he also had related political appeals, which was the ultimate goal that Machiavelli wanted to achieve, that is, to find a suitable way to save Florence from the crisis in his limited knowledge reserves. Each person's knowledge is closely related to his interests and learning experiences. As a historian, Machiavelli's strong political ideas and patriotic passion prompted him to mobilize his knowledge when Italy was in a state of internal strife and economic decline. This made the author, who was concerned about his country and people, explore a way to combine history and politics. It was the first attempt to use history as a tool to serve the political method. From today's point of view, his attempt was a great success and left a mark on historical methods [4].

3.2. Historical Facts Reading Needs Long-Term Accumulation

Machiavelli was over 50 years old when he gradually reached the peak of his academic career. Both his political experience and knowledge reserve had reached a saturation state. He wanted to convey his political ambition, but encountered setbacks in his political career. Therefore, when this time he

was frustrated in politics, he could only announce his ideas and thoughts in the form of literary works and historical works. Elton wrote of Machiavelli's writing in *The New Cambridge Modern History*: "He tried to base his theories fairly on solid facts; These things did happen, he used to say, and this is what happened, and this is the lesson they teach" [5]. That is to say, most of Machiavelli's arguments and views, even if they can-not be completely based on the actual historical facts, but these political thoughts are understood from the relevant events he experienced. From this point, we can see that Machiavelli, as a medieval historian, had already had a rigorous thought of historical research of "say a word for one piece of material", and realized that the prerequisite for historical research to serve politics is the accumulation of sufficient historical knowledge, which is also valuable.

If a political thought wants to have sufficient political, historical and practical significance, it must be built on the basis of knowledge and rooted in the social status quo at that time. Fourteen years of political work, especially diplomatic practice, enabled Machiavelli not only to go deep into the center of the government of Florence to find the root causes of its problems, but also to understand the various political measures taken by other countries in favor of his country. In essence, this experience had a great influence on Machiavelli's subsequent literary creation: without this experience, his political experience would be thin and superficial.

However, the problems of a society are complex and are caused by multiple factors. Therefore, when Machiavelli experienced the treatment of the superior, the exiles and the commoners successively, he was able to jump out of the first perspective of himself and viewed the sufferings of Florence in a more rational and comprehensive way from a third-person perspective. He realized that the people at the bottom could only shout slogans and still feared the authority of the old aristocracy, just like what said in the book that: "Now that the opportune moment has come, and the leaders have taken their lead, they seem bewildered, and stare at each other, as if they would rather wait until those who are striving for their freedom have been slaughtered, until their chains are riveted more firmly" [1]. He also recognized that the present political system could not prevent endless factional strife: "from the very faction that they were on guard against, a new and more powerful faction would arise, thus placing the Republic in greater danger" [1]. These problems, which had originated in the past and existed long in the short history of Florence, undoubtedly gave this Florentine political thinker important "creative" inspiration.

With a deep understanding of all levels, Machiavelli was able to cut into the dilemma of "the decline of Florence" from multiple angles, and disentangle the most fundamental cause from the many superficial causes. His most famous ideological work "*The Prince*" is not according to the "will of God" claimed by many scholars in the Middle Ages, but rooted in the actual situation of reality, which is highly materialistic [6]. Clearly, this thorough and top-down knowledge of Florence's brief decades of history is one reason why Machiavelli's ideas were able to have a profound impact on later Western politics and even on Marx's thinking.

Machiavelli was most proud of his knowledge. Not only his early experience of Florence's weakness in power and politics, but also the history of Rome, which he had studied since childhood. At the beginning of the third chapter of *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli compares the characteristics, causes and results of the struggles between Florence and Rome, and clearly shows the pain points of Florence's chaos by comparing the differences between the two. In fact, many of Machiavelli's historical judgments refer to Roman practices in the past. His ideas were deeply influenced by *Livy's History of Rome*, and the preface to another book, *Livy's Treatise on Roman History*, gives us a glimpse of what he was trying to achieve by studying Roman history, that the author hopes the readers can easily learn from historical experiences from it [7].

To put it simply, Machiavelli believed that Rome in Livy's time was in a similar historical environment to Florence today, so he hoped to transform the current political situation with the help of Rome's old experience [8]. For Machiavelli, the History of Rome serves as a historical guide, that

is, he tried to apply the past experience in solving present problems. This is one of the reasons why he is called a historian. Not only because he wrote historical works, but also because he was able to think about things in the way of doing historical research. He compared the experience of Rome with the dilemma of Florence to get the best solution, which was the expression of using historical knowledge to solve the existing problems, but also the feedback from his rich historical experience accumulation. If he did not have a good grasp of Roman history, he could not find a similar period in history corresponding to the current stage, so as to find solutions in the previous countermeasures. It is like looking for a needle in a haystack. But with a full and rich history, as Machiavelli did, it was much more efficient to draw lessons from stories. Machiavelli's practical experience tells future generations that only with sufficient reserves of past experience can we come up with effective and comprehensive solutions to the difficulties we encounter today.

Any event is multi-faceted and three-dimensional, not to mention historical events. They are often affected by multiple factors such as humanity, economy, politics and individual thought. If the understanding of them is only a superficial, partial understanding, such a move would only lead to the experience of the plane is simple. It could lead to many problems in practical application, and ultimately the movement could only be abandoned; If you only read from the book but do not know the actual reality, just mechanically apply the past experience in reality, it will eventually lead to failure as well.

Machiavelli, in making his political case with the help of history, had achieved a comprehensive grasp of Rome's past experience and years of in-depth observation of the realities of Florence. After the completion of these two works, he made use of his rich historical knowledge reserve flexibly, and based on the actual situation of the present, through various historical materials as the basis as well, finally condensed the thoughts and viewpoints that influenced the later generations. Therefore, in order to enrich self-understanding and polish political opinions through history, comprehensive and sufficient historical knowledge and understanding of the actual situation are essential. The study and research of history needs the accumulation of historical facts. Only quantitative changes could lead to qualitative change. Only when the knowledge reserve reaches a certain level can it accumulate steadily and put forward its own unique and academic insights.

3.3. Popular Means of Propaganda and Expression

Some of Machiavelli's biographers and historians of political thought have noted his tendency in the *Florentine Histories* to fabricate facts to support his moral exhortations. In fact, this tendency is not fabricated in the real sense, but through artificial processing and the addition of emotional color, so as to achieve his purpose of discussing politics through history. Machiavelli is not a historian in the traditional sense. The way of combining history and politics determines that his ultimate goal in history writing is to serve politics. It is a characteristic of history as a humanities discipline to study history and finally come up with one's own ideas and theories. The ultimate goal of continuous in-depth study of this discipline is the spiritual progress and sublimation, as well as the improvement of ideological realm. And to publicize and express the opinions obtained, the form is no more than writing books or speeches, that is, written records or oral transmission. However, in order for an idea to be widely accepted by people, spread widely in society, and achieve the goal of historians to reform other people's thoughts and publicize their own opinions, the expression of their own historical views needs a certain popularity.

As a political work written under the guise of a history book, whether the political propositions contained in the *Florentine Histories* can be publicized and widely accepted is more significant to the author. To this end, Machiavelli spared no effort at his disposal to make the book as accessible as possible, which in turn is the book's defining feature. Influenced by the Renaissance and the retro trend, Machiavelli imitated the writing style of the classical historian Thucydides in his writing. He

integrated his own emotions into the history books, and strengthened the impression of the contents of his works in the minds of readers through the effect of self-tragedy, so as to strengthen the role of teaching the later generations. Zhu Hongjun and Zhang Jun mentioned in *On Thucydides' Historical Writing* that "Thucydides not only made macro analysis of historical laws, but also analyzed people or groups in specific historical situations" [9]. When learning Thucydides' writing method, Machiavelli internalized the writing methods and added his own emotional color and unique style to it. Therefore, most of the characters depicted in the *Florentine Histories* are figures with strong patriotism, which is closely related to the author's loyalty and love for Florence. These characters are often very tragic color, with a kind of "sacrifice to the country, look at the death suddenly like return" attitude appeared in the book, among which the depiction of Benedetto is the most vivid.

The beauty and appeal of the text can arouse readers' resonance to a large extent and deepen their sense of identity for the characters and things they do, so as to achieve the purpose of conveying the author's political thoughts. In his political practice, Machiavelli attributed the corruption of the rulers of Florence to "the inherent evil of human nature" and believed that "men, women and children are full of vile vices" and that those in power only seek their own interests [1]. "All the laws and regulations, wars and peace, treaties and agreements they engage in are not for the public interest or the common honor of the city. Just for the benefit and convenience of a handful of people" [1]. Machiavelli attributed moral decay as one of the causes of Florence's decline, which led him to praise patriotic celebrities through a variety of literary devices. There is no doubt that this writing method is more conducive to the expression of the author's views. It is a reference method for us to express the theoretical views after the completion of historical research, by making use of literary skills to make our historical views easier to be accepted by readers.

Like Thucydides, Machiavelli wrote heavily from speeches. In the expression of the main ideas, Machiavelli did not directly adopt the way of comment, but chose to use the first- or third-person speech to express indirectly. Although in the current perspective, it is quite possible that the author first described and evaluated historical events and then fabricated the contents according to the occasions when historical facts happened [10]. He just using the same creation method as Thucydides did. This writing method effectively narrowed the distance between the author and the readers, and enabled the readers to form a stronger cognition of the views the author wanted to express. It effectively achieved the purpose of promoting political and historical propositions.

In a word, after historical study and research have reached a certain level and formed their own views, they can choose a more "down-to-earth" way to express and export their views to reach the masses. They can use popular and vivid language to facilitate more people's reading and arouse their interest in reading, so as to achieve the purpose of political propaganda.

4.   Conclusion

Machiavelli's thought was derived from *Livy's History of Rome*, and developed and polished with the continuous development of history and cognition. Machiavelli read political ideas from history and spread his political ideas by writing history books. The *Florentine Histories* not only contains ideas to save the decline of Florence, but also contains Machiavelli's own learning methods from the level of historical research. By the time he had completed his accumulation of historical knowledge and used history as a vehicle to convey his political views in an accessible form, the Florentine historian had already taught the learning method of history. History is the basis of political understanding, and politics is the ultimate goal of studying history. Only by constantly accumulating historical facts when the ideological realm has not reached a high enough level can we draw experience and lessons from history and find the optimal solution when we fall into a realistic dilemma.

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