

10.18686/frim.v2i3.4242

# A Study on the Controversy of “Confucius Executing Shao Zhengmao”

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**Abstract:** The controversial issue of “Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao” has always been surrounded by diverging opinions, making it difficult to distinguish between truth and falsehood. The academic community holds two main viewpoints on this matter: denial and acceptance. Deniers do not acknowledge this historical account and seek to uphold the saintly image of Confucius. Acceptors, on the other hand, adopt two attitudes based on accepting it as a credible historical record: they either respect or criticize Confucius. Regardless of the viewpoint, they all reflect people’s contemplation on the image of Confucius. This issue is not merely an academic question, but also delves into the spiritual essence of traditional Chinese politics.

**Keywords:** Confucius; Execution of Shaozhengmao; Traditional politics

The historical account of Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao has generated significant controversy. It is hard to imagine Confucius, who advocated for governance with virtue and the avoidance of killing, would execute Shao Zhengmao within seven days of taking office. Critics argue that this goes against the saintly image of Confucius and accuse it of being a smear campaign. However, there are also proponents who believe that Confucius’s “execution as a saint” was justified or who criticize Confucius as hypocritical. The significance of this debate extends beyond the event itself and rises to the question of how to categorize it.

## 1. Controversy between denial and acceptance

### 1.1 Denial

The earliest record of "Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao" is found in the "Xunzi: Youzuo": Confucius was appointed as the chief minister of Lu, and within seven days of his appointment, he executed Shao Zhengmao. " Apart from this, records of this event can be found in "Records of the Historian, " "Huainanzi, " "Book of Han, " "Lunheng, " "Sayings of Confucius, " and other documents.

It was not until the Southern Song Dynasty that Zhu Xi, Ye Shi, and others raised doubts about this. Zhu Xi believed that since this incident was not recorded in the Analects or the Spring and Autumn Annals, "it must be the resentment of Confucian scholars in Qi and Lu for the saints' dereliction of duty, which is why they made up this story to boast about their authority." Ye Shi also believed that Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao was "probably a scholar's allegory, not the factual record of a sage." They believed that "Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao" was groundless and a fabrication by the other disciples.

Since modern times, Neo-Confucianists have also denied this event, believing it to be a defamation of Confucius by the Legalists in the Confucian-Legalist debate. Confucius could not have killed someone merely for their words. Moreover, the legal conditions and political needs in Confucius's time did not punish ideological crimes, which contradicts the Confucian principle of "governing by virtue, not by punishment."

### 1.2 Acceptance

The theory of acceptance began to gain popularity in modern times. With the influx of Western learning to the East, the status of Confucius was affected. The reformists used "Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao" to accuse the conservatives of blocking the way of speech and eliminating dissent. During the May Fourth Movement, under the slogan "Down with the Kong Family Mansion, " the historical event of Confucius "killing someone" was inevitably criticized. These proponents of reality affirm the historical records of this period and use them to criticize Confucius as hypocritical, authoritarian, and indiscriminate in his killings. These views are inevitably biased and have departed from discussing specific issues to the extent of launching personal attacks on Confucius.

Some scholars acknowledge the historical records of this period and believe that "Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao" was just a normal political event. Shao Zhengmao, as an official of the state of Lu, committed rebellion and brought disaster to the people. Confucius' execution of him was in line with his political ideals and moral pursuits, aiming to rid the people of harm and was consistent with the social

environment at that time. "Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao" was out of political necessity, and it might not even have been Confucius' decision, but rather the command of the ruler of Lu. These views attempt to prove that Confucius would not kill without reason, or perhaps did not kill at all, aiming to uphold Confucius' image as a "benevolent person."

### 1.3 Behind the Controversy

The author believes that "Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao" is historical fact. The above-mentioned denialist views are difficult to convince. There is a possibility that Confucian classics intentionally avoided mentioning this event, which is understandable. Is it possible that this event was fabricated by Legalists? The premise of this view is that Confucius did not advocate punishment and advocated using rituals and music to educate the people, so it must have been fabricated by Legalists who advocated harsh laws. However, in fact, Confucius did not outright reject punishment. Confucius only denied "improper punishments." Both rituals and laws are means to maintain social order, and even Legalists do not exclude the role of rituals and righteousness. Han Fei, the master of Legalism, was a student of Xunzi, and Confucianism and Legalism actually share similar views. Therefore, the argument that Legalists fabricated the event because Confucius did not primarily use punishment is not convincing.

So why is there such a huge controversy over this event? It can only be said that "where there is fame, there is controversy." Since the Southern Song Dynasty, Confucianism dominated the ideological sphere, and the status of Confucianism was greatly elevated. Confucius, as the sage, naturally became a towering and perfect saintly figure, incapable of making mistakes, let alone killing someone. Confucius' image was continuously deified, and those who deny this event undoubtedly seek to uphold this image and the sacred status of Confucianism. On the other hand, some proponents of reality are overly aggressive in their criticism of Confucius and Confucianism, which has been common in modern and contemporary times. When criticizing tradition, they naturally seize upon this handle. From a modern perspective, Confucius' actions may inevitably be seen as tyrannical due to his speech and ideological thoughts, which is also the internal reason why deniers vehemently reject this historical record.

## 2. Confucius' "Execution of a nobleman"

According to the record in the "Youzuo" section, Confucius executed Shao Zhengmao within seven days of taking office, which puzzled his disciples. They were puzzled because Shao Zhengmao was a renowned figure in the state of Lu. Confucius enumerated Shao Zhengmao's five major offenses: "having a cunning and treacherous mind, engaging in obstinate and unyielding behavior, speaking deceitfully but eloquently, keeping detailed records of disgraceful matters and disseminating them widely, and supporting and promoting unorthodox words and actions." Interpreted literally, these five offenses might not seem like crimes today, let alone punishable by death. However, they could be understood as posing significant political and social hazards. In this light, Shao Zhengmao was undoubtedly a troublemaker, deserving of the "execution by a nobleman."

Confucius then explained the specific reasons for executing Shao Zhengmao: first, Shao Zhengmao's activities were conducive to gathering followers and forming factions; second, his speech was capable of embellishing evil and confusing people; third, his stubbornness could lead to him forming his own faction and rebelling against the court. Confucius used three "conducive to" phrases to conclude that Shao Zhengmao exhibited the traits of a troublemaker, which necessitated his removal. However, the use of "conducive to" also suggests that Shao Zhengmao may not have actually engaged in the act of gathering followers for rebellion but showed signs of it, which raises the question of whether this was sufficient justification for his execution.

There might have been a personal reason behind Confucius's decision to execute Shao Zhengmao. "Shao Zhengmao lectured in Lu and had many followers. Only Yan Hui did not leave Confucius' side." Shao Zhengmao also lectured in the state of Lu and caused Confucius' disciples to leave him to attend Shao Zhengmao's lectures. Confucius already disliked people who were "deceitful in speech" and "used cunning tactics." Now, with even his own students being influenced by Shao Zhengmao, it's understandable that he would take action once he had the power. Confucius's "execution by a nobleman" was simply a means for the ruling class to maintain their dominance, but because the central figure was the deified Confucius, it sparked such controversy. If we simply deny it, we would fall into the abyss of historical nihilism. This issue provides us with a perspective on understanding the spiritual essence of traditional Chinese politics.

## 3. Politics and Freedom of Speech

In Chinese history, from the burning of books and burying of scholars by Qin Shihuang, to the literary inquisitions of the Ming and Qing dynasties, freedom of speech under feudal rule was nothing but a fairy tale. Controlling speech, stifling thought, and eliminating all factors unfavorable to rule were necessary to maintain the interests of the ruling clique.

The reason for the execution of Socrates in Athens was his misleading of the youth and disrespect for the gods, similarly, it was "capable of gathering followers for rebellion through residence and capable of deceiving the masses through speech," suggesting that both Eastern and

Western ruling classes take action against thought crimes. Liang Qichao(1902)once wrote: "Socrates was exiled in Athens, exiled by the blind masses; the scholarship of Shao Zhengmao is not even comparable to Socrates, yet it is considered worthy of exiling by the saints. I am truly ashamed on behalf of our academic community." Today, we may not know the thoughts of Shao Zhengmao, but whatever ideas led Confucius' disciples to abandon their master must have constituted a self-contained system of "Maostudies."

In the issue of "Confucius executing Shao Zhengmao, " we should strive to restore the true image of Confucius and respect the truth and objectivity of history. Since Emperor Wu of Han began to solely honor Confucianism, the spirit of Confucianism has been closely linked with traditional Chinese politics. It has made various moral demands on people, even rulers, but it has never asserted the rights of the people. This is a problem worthy of our consideration even today.

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