

# A Study of Yanzi's Thought on Consumption

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**Abstract:** Yanzi's consumption ideology was developed on the basis of inheriting the governing philosophy of enlightened rulers and capable ministers, and gradually enriched and improved through his experience in government and politics. Yanzi not only put forward the famous theories of "profit margin theory" and "people-oriented theory" at the theoretical level, but more importantly, he set an example by advocating frugality and actively advising the monarch to avoid extravagance and frugality, and devoted his entire life to practicing his consumption philosophy.

**Keywords:** Yanzi, Consumption Thought, Thrifty, People-Centered Philosophy

## 1. Introduction

Yanzi, also known as Ying and styled Pingzhong, was a famous politician, thinker, and diplomat during the Spring and Autumn Period. He was born in Yiwei, Donglai. Famous historian Sima Qian once highly praised this famous minister of Qi, saying, "Even if I were to whip and drive the carriage for him, I would still be very happy and longing for him"[1]. For thousands of years, there have been popular stories of him killing three scholars with two peaches, governing Dong'a twice, and sending an envoy to Chu. In the late Spring and Autumn period, the political situation in the state of Qi was turbulent, and the monarchs and officials were all immersed in singing and dancing. They met their extravagant and hedonistic life by plundering the domestic people. However, Yanzi always maintained a clear mind. He not only adhered to the style of being honest and clean for the people, but also thrifty, and became a model of clean government in later generations.

Jiang Taigong, the founder of the state of Qi, established the tradition of attaching importance to industry and Commerce in the state of Qi after he was first granted the title of Qi. When Guan Zhong ruled the Qi Dynasty, he listed businessmen as one of the four occupations for civilians, implemented many measures to attract investment and develop commercial trade, advocated frugality, and actively advocated extravagant consumption contrary to the traditional concept. In ancient China, there was a tradition of advocating thrift and restraining extravagance. The vigorous development of commodity economy in Qi made the concept of extravagant consumption appear for the first time in ancient China, where the small-scale peasant economy was the main economic type. But more than a hundred years later, Yan Ying, another prime minister of the state of Qi, was extremely frugal and thrifty all his life, leaving behind a leather robe that has been worn for many years.

## 2. The main connotation of Yanzi's consumption thought

Yanzi's consumption thought is an important part of his idea of governing the country. The core principle is to advocate thrift and restrain extravagance. He advocates that social stability and improvement of people's livelihood can be achieved by curbing the excessive consumption of rulers and rationally allocating consumption resources.

### 2.1 Advocate the people-oriented consumption concept

When discussing the method of governing the country with Shu Xiang, a famous Minister of the Jin State, Yanzi explained his way of governing the country: "A ruler who can always put the interests of the people in the first place will not lose his dignity even if he is in a humble position, and will not lose his justice even if he is poor"[2]. Yanzi not only emphasized the imperative of incorruptible governance, but also formulated the sophisticated statecraft of fabric-gain theory—a political analogue crafted from the weaver's gauge. In his opinion, "wealth should be as limited as cloth and silk. It should be restricted by

system so that it change unlimited. Everyone wants to live in affluence and enjoy the benefits of wealth. Therefore, we should use morality to regulate the limit, so that people will not indulge because of wealth. This is called the limit of wealth. Too much wealth will cause disaster, so I dare not covet too much wealth"[2]. Fu serves as the measuring gauge for fabric dimensions. Yanzi employed this concept of full to him in the pursuit of gain within normative bounds. He acknowledged the profit seeking nature of human beings, but also pointed out that excessive pursuit of interests is prone to disasters, so he advocated following moral standards to guide the pursuit of fame and wealth.

Yanzi asserted that rulers must practice incorruptible administration, treating the people as the foundation of the state and adhering to the principles of cherishing the people as one's own flesh and cultivating shared joy through enlightened governance. Officials should "accept remuneration commensurate with proven competence"[2] assume office only after measuring virtue against its demands; uphold an overarching moral vision and embody unsullied conduct in public service; while pursuing gains, ensure all actions are hemmed by righteousness.

Yanzi steadfastly discharged his ministerial duties. As a perpetual remonstrating minister, he exhorted Duke Jing of Qi to renounce extravagance, cherish the people, and show leniency toward clan members. As a high minister of state, he repeatedly succored refugees, even threatening resignation to halt the Duke's coercive conscription of labor. "During the reign of Duke Jing of Qi, it rained for 17 days. Duke Jing of Qi drank day and night. Yanzi asked for some food to be distributed to the people, but he was not allowed to do so many times. Duke Jing of Qi also sent people to tour all over the country to recruit people who are good at singing. Yanzi was very unhappy when he heard about this, so he distributed the grain planted in his own land to the people, and also sent the equipment used to carry grain to the road"[2]. After some persuasion to Duke Jing of Qi, Yanzi resigned and left sadly. The departure of Yanzi made him repent. After Duke Jing of Qi chased Yanzi back, "Duke Jing of Qi returned to the palace, reduced his meals and put away all his musical instruments"[2]. Take out the grain and property from the national treasury to help the people. Yanzi's resignation when he was in power sounded the alarm to Duke Jing of Qi, making him try his best to appease the victims, ease class antagonism through resource redistribution, and maintain social stability.

The core value of Yanzi's consumption thought is "people-oriented", which led him to propose the political theory propositions of "government must be in line with the people" and "ensuring the monarch does not offend the people", promoting rulers to pay attention to the living conditions of the people. This undoubtedly had a positive effect in the hierarchical society of that time. Yan Zi advocated for governing the country with integrity and frugality, which to some extent restrained the desires of the ruling class, reduced the burden on the people, and maintained the stability of the regime and society.

## ***2.2 Set an example and advocate a frugal lifestyle***

Advocating thrift was Yanzi's way of life. Although he was noble, he was famous for advocating thrift in terms of food, clothing, housing and transportation. In terms of diet, Yanzi has always been a mediocre, "His sustenance consisted solely of unpolished coarse millet, three game birds roasted over fire, five wildfowl eggs, and foraged marsh greens"[2]. He believed that, "with the people reduced to utter destitution, such meager fare was blessing enough simply to stave off starvation"[2]. Yanzi's family had very little meat for every meal. Once an envoy from Duke Jing of Qi came to his house, and Yanzi gave him the meal. In the end, neither of them was full. After hearing this, Duke Jing of Qi wished to bestow rewards upon Yanzi, but Yanzi declined with grace: "By the ruler's boundless grace, three generations of my kin are deluged with favor—extending even to friends, and relieving the common folk"[2]. Although Yanzi lived a frugal life, he was not stingy and distributed the rewards of the monarch to his relatives, friends and people in trouble.

Duke Jing of Qi once wanted to build a big house for Yanzi many times, but he refused. "When Yanzi was sent to the state of Jin, Duke Jing of Qi built a new house for him. After he returned to the state of Qi, his new house had been built. Yanzi bowed in gratitude to Duke Jing of Qi. Then he destroyed the new house, and rebuilt the houses that had been demolished because of the construction of the new house for him. They were all restored to their original appearance, so that the people who had lived there could still live there"[3]. Duke Jing of Qi expanded Yanzi's house during his diplomatic mission to the state of Jin. After Yanzi returned, he demolished the expanded house, restored the neighborhood's house, and invited the residents who had previously lived here to return to the old site. As Qi's high minister, Yanzi traveled in a shabby carriage. When Duke Jing of Qi encountered it, he dispatched Liang Qiuju to deliver a grand quadriga. Thrice did Yanzi refuse the gift. Facing the sovereign's chariot and steeds, he declined three times.

With his own practical actions, Yanzi tried to be simple and simple in terms of clothing, food, housing and transportation, set an example for the ruling class and the people, and expected the society of Qi to return to the stage of simple folk customs. At the same time, in order to maintain the hierarchical system at that time, he repeatedly refused the reward of Duke Jing of Qi beyond etiquette, and always pursued the way of frugality.

Yanzi served in office for several decades. He not only repeatedly dissuaded Duke Jing of Qi from his profligate and excessive indulgences through masterful persuasion, but also steadfastly practiced frugality himself. Leading by example among the ministers and nobles, he personally forwent extravagance and embraced simplicity. The fundamental reason Yanzi's legacy endures through the ages lies precisely in his personal embodiment of integrity in governance. His principles regarding personal spending were not only characterized by rigorous self-discipline but also inherent exemplariness, setting a benchmark of uprightness and incorruptibility for the ruler and other high-ranking officials. The values pursued by the ruling class demonstrably shape the preferences of the common people. Therefore, building a clean government must give top priority to the exemplary role of the rulers.

### ***2.3 Dissuade the monarch from extravagance and control desire***

Reigning in extravagance, Duke Jing of Qi relentlessly pursued pleasure—erecting palatial complexes like Luqin and Changlai, embellishing palaces, hunting frequently, and indulging in drunken excesses. His opulent, ostentatious lifestyle came at the cost of the laboring poor. Yanzi repeatedly admonished the ruler for his indulgence and forced labor, urging compassion for the people and aid to the destitute. Though often achieving little, his relentless efforts sparked moments of awakening: Duke Jing of Qi halted some resource-draining projects.

"Duke Jing of Qi was a person who liked to flatter and flatter, loved pleasure greatly, did not care about people's livelihoods, but was able to correct his mistakes and was good at accepting advice. Yan Ying always played the role of a timely remonstrant who pointed out his mistakes and provided correct guidance and advice"[4]. Yanzi repeatedly halted his ceremonial excesses—lavish funerals for concubines, favorites, and even pets that breached ritual protocols. Ancient burial rites served as instruments of social instruction: rulers manipulated mortuary standards to reward or discipline the living. Confronting the state funeral for a hound, Yanzi argued: "The destitute elderly shiver in cold while this dog receives sacrificial offerings; widows and orphans starve while it lies in a coffin. Such perverse acts breed resentment among our people toward their sovereign and invite contempt from neighboring states"[2]. This reveals Yanzi's profound compassion for the suffering and his political strategy to model virtue, relieve hardship, and command respect abroad.

Amidst rampant extortion to fund wars and private indulgences, the rulers of Qi wantonly executed subjects over trivial whims—even for coveted curios. This created perverse market realities where prosthetic shoes for amputees outsold regular footwear at premium prices. As the Qi court teetered toward collapse, Yanzi fulfilled his ministerial duty: deploying every rhetorical art to admonish rulers against extravagance and cruelty, while resigning repeatedly to halt forced labor projects. Through timely interventions, he rectified sovereign's errors and advocated leniency toward the people.

As a master strategist of persuasion, Yanzi's measured counsel occasionally moved Duke Jing of Qi to spare the people from excessive burdens. While touring the Shou Palace, Duke Jing of Qi encountered an elderly man carrying a bundle of firewood, his face gaunt with hunger. Moved to sorrow, he sighed: "Command the officers to provide his sustenance"[2]. "While disturbing a nest, Duke Jing of Qi glimpsed fledglings too frail to survive. In a moment of compassion, he returned the chicks to their cradle of twigs"[2]. With the help of these two accidents, Yan Ying promptly praised Duke Jing of Qi for his caring for the elderly and the weak and caring for the people's livelihood, and praised him for his way of being a king. Duke Jing of Qi approved the policy of improving people's livelihood while he was happy.

### ***2.4 Advocate reducing consumption expenditure such as sacrifice***

In the Zhou Dynasty, a patriarchal country based on blood ties, funeral, as an important ritual related to the interests of the living and the dead, played an important role in the actual life of the emperor of the Zhou Dynasty and the common people. "Funeral rites adorn the departed with the semblance of life, simulating their living state to solemnly send them into death. Thus we tend to the dead as if they lived, honor the gone as though present—for the beginning and end form a coherent continuum"[5]. Ancient Chinese held a deep-seated belief in dual realms—the nether world and the yang world. Thus the deceased were tended as though living, with tomb architecture and burial artifacts meticulously mirroring

earthly dwellings. Funeral rites thus crystallized contemporaneous conceptions of life-death transcendence and material cultural attainment.

"Through the codification and practice of funeral rites, the entire society was incorporated into orderly structural matrices of human interaction—self-contained units, each relatively complete yet distinctly bounded"[6]. On the one hand, funerals enable the deceased to rest and sleep underground; On the other hand, the funeral has played a good role in propaganda and education for the living through a series of ritual activities. The binding force of filial mourning exerts transformative impacts both individually and societally, elevating filial observance to a fundamental tenet for navigating vertical relationships across the social hierarchy.

Yanzi, as a noble class of the state of Qi at that time, learned the relevant etiquette system from childhood under the guidance of his father, and knew all the etiquette at that time clearly. Classical texts including Zuo Zhuan, Kongzi Jiayu and Li Ji uniformly chronicle Yanzi's observance of the three-year mourning ritual for his father and performance of solemn ancestral worship rites. "When Yan Huanzi of Qi passed away, his son Yan Ying donned coarse hemp garments with raw edges, tied a girdle of rush fiber, bore a mourning staff, and trod in sedge sandals. Sustained by thin gruel alone, he dwelt in a crude mourning hut, sleeping upon straw matting with bundled grass as his pillow. When his senior steward protested, "This violates the rites prescribed for a minister, " Yan Ying retorted with principled defiance: "Only those bearing full ministerial rank merit such ceremonial honors"[3]. Through material austerity in his mourning rituals and ancestral veneration, Yanzi manifested profound yearning remembrance for his departed father.

During the highly ritualized Zhou Dynasty, the ruling class maintained political stability through practices like sacrificial ceremonies and divination. In the Spring and Autumn period, funeral rites—a ritual system with distinct disciplinary and didactic functions—served as powerful tools for indoctrination and moral instruction for the living. "Thus, the funeral rites serve no other purpose than to clarify the meaning of life and death, to express grief and reverence in sending off the deceased, and finally, to ensure their proper burial"[5]. Witnessing the differences in funeral observances based on social rank and lineage relations, the living would become more committed to upholding the authority of the patriarchal clan system, practicing the duties of subjects and filial piety, and striving to attain a more elevated social status. Yanzi, however, disapproved of such excessively extravagant funeral practices. He argued: "Today, those officiating rituals burden the people with elaborate ceremonies and excessive observances, promote excessive revelry that corrupts the people, and exalt death to the detriment of the living. These three practices are proscribed by the sage kings"[2].

### ***2.5 Advocating luxury consumption will endanger national stability***

Yanzi clearly pointed out that the extravagant behavior of the rulers would endanger the long-term stability of the country. Duke Jing of Qi provided coffins and sacrifices for his hounds to entertain the ministers. Yanzi severely criticized him: "collecting such heavy taxes instead of using them on the people, but wasting money and property playing with the officials. He despised the people's worries and paid attention to the officials' fun, so the country had no hope"[2]. he believed that honesty was the root of politics, and advocated that the rulers should set an example and select honest and self-discipline officials.

Duke Jing of Qi loves drinking and often drinks too much. Yanzi has repeatedly appeared to dissuade Duke Jing of Qi. Yanzi believed that : "In ancient times, the purpose of drinking was to dredge Qi and blood and communicate feelings. Men would not gather to drink and have fun, which would not interfere with farming. Women would not gather to drink and have fun, which would not interfere with weaving. Even if men and women gathered to drink and have fun, it would not exceed the etiquette of five offerings, and they would be beheaded if they exceeded. If the monarch could practice it, there would be no disaster in the country"[2]. He also believed that: "In ancient times, there were monarchs who ruled the world wearing patched clothes. Their governing principle was to love life and hate killing, but to be frugal but to make their men rich. People in the world were not obedient to their clothes, but the morality attached to them"[2].

During the spring and Autumn period, it was difficult for many people of insight to display their talents. The important reason was that they were afraid of the majesty of the rulers and were afraid to express their opinions. There was a man with lofty ideals in the state of Yan at midnight. When he visited Yanzi, he was very frightened. Yanzi comforted him with a bright smile and treated him politely. Then he could speak freely. Yanzi lamented that talented people like minziwu would be afraid, and there must be many talents buried. Therefore, he advocated that the rulers should lay down their authority and make

more people with lofty ideals dare to express their views and play their due role.

Selecting talents is an important guarantee for the prosperity of a country. In the changeable spring and Autumn period, talent selection is closely related to the fate of the country. An important measure to strengthen the construction of a clean and honest government is to select talents and establish a top-down team of clean and honest officials. Yanzi believes that there are three kinds of ominous things in the country: "It is the first unlucky thing that a virtuous person does not know; it is the second unlucky thing that a virtuous person does not appoint; it is the third unlucky thing that a virtuous person does not entrust a heavy responsibility"[2]. He has always advised the rulers to do a good job in knowing, using and appointing virtuous people, and give full play to the role of talents to help the country maintain long-term stability.

Yanzi paid attention to the teaching of talents according to their aptitude, and the strategy of appointing talents was to use their strengths and avoid their weaknesses. He said: "an outstanding monarch does not value flatterers, nor promote people who form a party for personal gain. He stresses the work of promoting people's strengths, avoiding people's weaknesses and clumsiness, and effectively tap and play the potential of talents"[2]. Duke Jing of Qi once wanted to appoint Gao Ju, Yanzi's friend, but Yanzi stopped him: "although Gao Ju appears to be Yanzi's friend, he regards making friends with Yanzi as an opportunity to get promoted and get rich. Such a person is not worth making friends with, let alone helping the monarch deal with political affairs"[2]. Yanzi is not only pro, but also pays attention to the morality of talents, and has repeatedly warned the monarch to stay away from courteous officials and villains.

### 3. Conclusions

Yanzi's philosophy on consumption was a vital component of his governance ideology, centering on the advocacy of frugality and the suppression of lavish living. His consumption principles were manifested not only in his personal life of austerity but also permeated his practical governance of the state. He consistently championed a people-centered approach to consumption. Through his remonstrations urging rulers to reduce extravagant expenditures on luxuries and lavish sacrificial ceremonies, he led by personal example in embracing a frugal lifestyle. Despite the evident class distinctions inherent in Yanzi's consumption philosophy—its primary aim being the preservation of the ruling house of Qi—when viewed against the backdrop of the various states during the Spring and Autumn period and considering Qi's specific historical circumstances, we can still discern his profound aspiration: a deep concern for his state and people, an exhaustive dedication to contemplating how best to serve his country. As a minister of Qi, he fervently hoped its ruler would strive with determination to strengthen the state, thereby upholding the authority of the ducal house and ensuring national stability. As a resident of Qi, he profoundly wished for all the people to be well-fed and warmly clothed, to live and work in peace and contentment, that the state might thereby achieve enduring peace and stability, standing proudly among the feudal states. Yanzi's governance practices enlighten us that any regime must adhere to the people-centered principle, making the cherishing of the people, the bringing of joy to the people, and the enriching of the people its fundamental values.

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