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# MENCIUS

(372-289 B.C.)

*Ge Zhengming*<sup>1</sup>

Mencius (Mengzi), a thinker and educator of the Warring States period of Chinese history whose influence was extremely important, was a key proponent of Confucianism. All his life he revered Confucius (Kongzi). He is on record as saying 'For as long as humanity has existed, no one has yet equalled Master Kong', and 'My sole ambition is to follow the example of Master Kong'. Mencius developed Confucius' philosophical doctrine, elaborating a system related to the school of thought known as subjective idealism. His theory of the natural goodness (*xingshan*) of human nature is based on the idea that the other cardinal virtues, benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), respect for rites (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*), are innate and should be cultivated by each and every person. The ruling feudal power saw him as the 'Second Sage', and from the end of the Song Dynasty, when the feudal political and economic system was on the decline, the *Mencius* (his collected writings) was raised to the rank of a 'classic', making it compulsory reading for the imperial civil service examinations or promotion. Mencius was regarded as the only orthodox perpetuator of Confucianism, second only to the 'Supreme Sage' himself, and their two doctrines were combined under the joint designation 'The way of Confucius and Mencius' (*Kong Meng zhi dao*). In the sphere of education, Mencius took up Confucius' ideas and developed them, leaving a priceless legacy to posterity. He occupies an outstanding place in the history of education of ancient China.

## His life and work as an educator

Mencius, whose first name was Ke, was a native of Zou (a district in Shandong province which still bears the same name), in the land of Lu. He was born in 372 B.C. and died in 289 B.C. at the age of 83. He was descended from Men Sun, a member of the nobility of the Lu kingdom. His father died young and his mother made great sacrifices to educate him, moving house on three occasions to offer her son a more propitious learning environment, and severing the thread on the shuttle of her loom whenever Mencius neglected his lessons to make him understand the need to persevere.

Mencius dedicated most of his life to teaching. On reaching adulthood, he spent more than twenty years travelling around the various kingdoms with his disciples to spread his political ideals. His reputation was such that 'dozens of chariots and hundreds of people' are said to have followed him. On one occasion, the chariots that escorted him and the dense crowd that thronged in his wake as he travelled from one vassal principality to another were far more magnificent than the processions that accompanied Confucius, and everywhere he was greeted with respect. In the twilight of his life, he returned to his homeland to divide his time between education and writing. 'Transmitting the gifts received from Heaven' was a great joy to him. He is deservedly regarded as one of the great figures of education of his time.

In the last few years of his life, Mencius gathered pupils around him, put down his

thoughts in writing and, with the help of Wan Zhang, Gong Sunchou and other disciples, compiled the anthology which bears his name and which relates his conversations with the feudal princes and his replies and arguments on various points of doctrine. As well as setting out Mencius's educational work and ideas, this work conveys a striking picture of the intellectual ferment of the time.

## Historical background

As already stated, Mencius' thinking on education took shape and matured during the Warring States period (c. 770-221 B.C.). The periods known in China as the Spring and Autumn and Warring States are considered to be times of great transformation, with the transition from slavery to feudalism. Economic and political changes had profound repercussions on ideas, culture and education. Culture ceased to be the preserve of slave-owners, knowledge spread to other sectors of society, an educated class emerged, private schools proliferated and different systems of thought were outlined. This new situation was one in which ideas could be expressed with great freedom. Even though sharp distinctions between the various branches of knowledge were not drawn at the time, it was this period that witnessed the emergence, in embryonic form, of such disciplines as philosophy, economics, political science, law, literature, aesthetics, history, geography, the military arts, the educational sciences, psychology, logic, mathematics, astronomy, agronomy, the manual arts, physics, chemistry, biology, hydrology, engineering technology and medicine. It was a time of extraordinary development in the history of education of ancient China. Great impetus was given to social progress and the foundations of feudal culture and education were laid. It can be said that the whole education system of ancient China came into being and took shape during this period. It was within this society in the throes of great transformation that Mencius' thinking on education was formed and developed.

## The purpose of education

Mencius held that the purpose of education was to cultivate good people who knew their station in society. He took up the concept of *ren* (humanity or benevolence) so dear to Confucius, feeling that the unification of China called for virtuous leaders like the sovereigns of former times. He recommended that they govern with benevolence, punish as little as possible, refrain from levying excessively high taxes, and ensure that people were assigned five *mu* of land to live on and 100 *mu* to cultivate and that they 'eat their fill in fat years and do not starve to death in lean years'. Thus would the 'sovereign' obtain the 'Mandate of Heaven'. In order to reign, he must have the support of the people; in order to have the support of the people, he must win their hearts and make them happy. In Mencius' eyes, benevolent government (*renzheng*) and virtuous administration (*dezhi*) went hand in hand, and sound administration itself came second to a good education. He therefore emphasized the fact that, in order to govern with benevolence, it was first necessary to provide a good education, the purpose of a good education being to win hearts.

According to Mencius, the first essential was to make sure that old people lacked neither silk to clothe themselves nor meat to feed themselves, and that the people suffered neither hunger nor cold. Only then would schools be opened and the population educated. Only an education provided in such conditions could be considered sound. As to its purpose, it must be to 'teach sons their duties towards their fathers and younger ones their duties to their elders'. That meant continual reference to the great principles of respect for one's father and mother and obedience to one's elder brothers and superiors, the explanation of these principles being the

fundamental aim of education. That was the cornerstone of Mencius' moral philosophy.

During the Spring and Autumn period, 'the degeneration of rites and the decadence of music' had induced Confucius to endeavour to regulate relationships between human beings and to recommend that 'each thing be given its own name and each person their own place', according to the precept: 'Let the prince behave as a prince, the minister as a minister, the father as a father and the son as a son'. Mencius also adopted this line of thinking and elaborated upon it.

Mencius' view of providing the people with enough to eat and to protect them from the cold, and urging them to open schools inculcating unremitting filial piety and love for one's elder brothers was that of a champion of the ethical principles that must govern relationships between father and son, prince and minister, husband and wife, older and younger persons and friends amongst themselves. 'When the people in power understand human relationships and have a sense of decorum, the common people will manifest their devotion', he said. If the ruling class could abide by these principles, the internal contradictions within that class would be attenuated and the patriarchal system would be consolidated. If the common people did likewise, 'crime and disorder' would disappear. In other words, once the upper echelons of society observed the rules of life in society and the common people lived together on good terms, harmony would naturally reign on earth. The objectives that Mencius assigned to education - inculcating filial piety and respect for one's elders, and teaching people to conduct themselves decently towards others - thus served his political aims. This Confucianist concept of education exerted a profound influence on Chinese feudal society.

## **The function of education**

Mencius believed that education played an important role in social development. Its primary function was to develop the mind and strengthen the cardinal virtues - benevolence, righteousness, respect for rites and wisdom. He held that the human being was naturally good, that virtues were innate and simply needed cultivating. Whosoever cultivated them would become a good man, a sage or even a saint. He who debased himself and failed to cultivate his virtues or lost them could only become a scoundrel, a savage or even a creature indistinguishable from an animal. The original virtues could not be developed unless they were reinforced by the knowledge acquired through education. And yet education as Mencius conceived it was above all a matter of self-cultivation and self-improvement. One should first seek to preserve one's good-heartedness, cultivate one's good inclinations and learn to know oneself, and anyone who lost their natural goodness should try to recover it. Benevolence (*ren*) was a natural virtue of the human being, and righteousness (*yi*) the path to be followed. Anyone who departed from that way and ceased to progress or, dispossessed of their original goodness, was unable to win it back, was much to be pitied. A man who loses his chickens or dog will go off in search of them, so why should he not do the same when he loses the sense of goodness? Learning serves no other purpose than to help people to retrieve the qualities they have lost. To Mencius, the function of education was to preserve and develop a person's good inclinations, to restore them to those who had lost them, and to fortify natural virtues.

Mencius advocated self-improvement, 'seeking within oneself', self-examination. Aware as he was, however, of the very real obstacles that might jeopardize the quest for knowledge and wisdom, he did not deny the influence of external factors. He recognized the direct effects of a good or bad harvest on the people's morals. And he was conscious of an environmental influence on learning. He affirmed that everything that surrounds us, everything that makes up our environment, has an effect on our character, our moral qualities and our willpower, but such an influence, however great it may be, is not decisive.

While emphasizing self-improvement, Mencius attached great importance to teaching dispensed by a master. Not only did he derive immense pleasure from ‘transmitting the gifts received from Heaven’ and had numerous pupils throughout his life, but he repeatedly stressed the merits of objective education and wrote a large number of commentaries on teaching and moral education. He believed that virtue required fathers and elder sons to see to the education of their sons or younger brothers. Those who behaved badly had to be guided along the right path, and those lacking in talent had to be educated. That was a duty that a good father could not shirk.

## **The theory of ‘natural goodness’**

Mencius was part of the intellectual movement known as subjective idealism. He saw the human heart, human nature and ‘heaven’ as three indissociable elements. His thinking on education is thus derived from his ‘doctrine of natural goodness’ (*Xingshanlun*). During the Warring States period, socio-economic development and increasing friction between the classes offered a breeding-ground for a variety of intellectual movements and inspired philosophers to speculate on human nature, and on the relationship between human nature and the outside world, in an attempt to resolve the social problems of their times. The question of human nature was thus one of the main bones of contention in discussions between rival schools of thought. Some maintained that human beings were by nature neither good nor bad, others that certain individuals were intrinsically bad or, by nature, equally inclined to good and evil; some held that human beings were naturally evil and others that they were naturally good. Mencius’ view was that man was predisposed to good, and if some individuals wandered from the right path and turned to evil, it was because external influences had ‘perverted their hearts’. This theory of the natural goodness of human nature was based on feelings, knowledge and rites, which are in fact acquired and not innate. Mencius thus posited the values of feudal society as pre-conditions for all experience. That led him to say: ‘the saint is of the same substance as I’; like anyone else, he enjoys tasty dishes, pretty melodies and beautiful colours.

Mencius believed that the living environment of the legendary sovereign Shun differed little from that of the savage living in the mountains. That the sovereign had become a paragon of virtue was due to his determination to improve himself. If the savage remained a savage it was because he lived in a pernicious environment and did not seek to improve himself, with the result that his natural goodness had wasted away. Those who, living in an unpropitious environment, ‘had no self-respect and were filled with self-doubt’, whose ‘words were disrespectful and unjust’, who let their natural goodness (*shanduan*) wither away and took a path that led them away from goodness, who breached the rules of correct moral conduct and disrupted the order established by the feudal rulers were pronounced by Mencius to be ‘not human beings’, to have lost their humanity and become animals. Such was the substance of Mencius’ ‘doctrine of natural goodness’, the theoretical basis for his concept of education.

## **Mencius’ concept of moral education**

### THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Mencius considered that character is something innate in every human being. Nature, heaven (*tian*) and human beings form a whole. The moral categories of ‘heaven’ are engraved on human nature, the rules that govern heaven are rooted in human morality and the human heart abounds in natural virtues. The ‘human heart’ and the ‘heart of heaven’ (*tianxin*) are correlated. Wealth or poverty are conferred on us by heavenly command and beyond our control. What we must do, however, is ‘seek within ourselves’, trying to develop and bring out the tendencies

towards goodness over which we have some control. It is clear that Mencius' ideas on moral education are closely linked with subjective idealism.

#### THE PRINCIPLES AND CONTENT OF MORAL EDUCATION

*Preserving one's natural goodness and controlling one's desires.* Mencius thought that the best way of developing one's good tendencies was to resist domination by material desires. Those who have few desires will lose little, if any, of their natural goodness. Conversely, those who are racked with desires may preserve some good traits but only very few. Mencius thus argued against cherishing excessive desires for material things.

*Seeking within oneself.* Mencius saw this as an important means of moral self-improvement: if I treat someone with love and he remains aloof, I must ask myself whether I am being generous enough; if someone is placed under my authority but does not obey me, I must ask myself if I am acting as wisely as I should; if I show consideration to someone but he does not reciprocate, I must ask myself if I am being sufficiently respectful. In short, whenever my conduct does not produce the expected results, I must seek the reasons for this within myself.

*Repenting and mending one's ways.* Mencius thought that those who refuse to recognize their material desires and lose the virtue of repentance are liable to commit reprehensible acts. Those who act wrongly but are ashamed of themselves can recover their propensity for goodness. One must endeavour to correct any errors one has committed and always take the merits of others as a model, trying to better oneself and join others in seeking goodness.

*Seeking to recover lost qualities, preserving the benefits of the 'night air' (yegi).* Mencius saw regaining a pure heart as one of the keys to moral self-improvement. It meant controlling one's desires, examining one's conscience, repenting and correcting one's faults. This is what he had in mind when he spoke of preserving the benefits of the 'night air': fortifying one's soul, cultivating one's natural goodness.

*Developing the natural nobility of the soul (haoran zhi qi).* Human beings must show strength of character and not go about their business half-heartedly and apathetically. They must display energy (*qi*) and not give way to despondency. In moral terms, they must possess the noble-mindedness that makes it possible to combat evil with justice.

*Strengthening one's resolve.* This concept was crucial to Mencius's idea of moral education. The hardships and misfortunes by which all are confronted in the course of a lifetime are conducive to meditation on the vicissitudes of fate, and this is how one acquires the wisdom (*dehui*) and thirst for knowledge (*giuzhi*) that will enable one to understand the world and improve one's ability to cope with it. The human being must have passed a thousand tests before being truly seasoned.

## Teaching methods

Mencius gave a great deal of thought to teaching methods and learned from his own great experience in this field. These are some of his precepts:

- Know to whom you are talking and adapt your teaching to each individual's aptitudes, adopting a lively and flexible approach that can be varied, according to the pupil.
- Lay down strict criteria and encourage personal initiative, setting the aims and then leaving pupils to practise and learn their lessons by themselves.

- Say profound things simply, speak knowledgeably and in great detail, teaching pupils what they do not know on the basis of what they do know. Use simple words to explain complex ideas and make sure that your own knowledge is extensive, so that you are able to give detailed explanations.
- Base your arguments on analogy and use comparisons to explain things; illustrate the most complex concepts with common examples taken from everyday life. Mencius himself often used analogy to support his arguments and simple images to clarify obscure points. Likewise, he often used easily understandable comparisons to reply to questions or to solve problems.

With regard to the learning process, Mencius made the following recommendations:

- Consolidate the skills you have acquired by individual work, seek a deeper understanding of what you have learned and let it become so deeply rooted in your mind that you have a perfect command of it.
- Progress step by step. Mencius regarded learning as a natural process. Progress should be slow but sure, taking care not to advance too quickly only to fall back subsequently.
- Work unremittingly. Pupils must persevere and be determined; they must acquire confidence, not losing heart at the first obstacle and above all not taking the easy way out.
- Pupils dive whole-heartedly into their work, devoting to it all their time and energy.

## The influence of Confucius

Mencius was 'the pupil of a disciple of Zi Si', whose real name was Kongzi; a grandson of Confucius, he had himself studied under the master's star pupil, Zengzi. Zengzi had passed Confucius' teachings on to Zi Si, whose disciple had in turn passed them on to Mencius. Thus, some 150 years after the death of Confucius, Mencius began to propagate his own ideas. Like him, he cited the ancient sovereigns Yao and Shun as examples and developed the master's theories about the need for virtuous administration (*dezhi*) and benevolent government (*renzheng*), which were, he held, essential in securing the support of the people. He considered that people endowed with wealth and a certain level of income also had to display moral qualities and observe certain rules of conduct, failing which anarchy and disorder would ensue. The idea that the country must be administered honestly, that the population must be educated and, first and foremost, that the common people who were to be educated must not be exposed to either hunger or cold is one of the keys to Mencius' concept of education.

Confucius said: 'He who possesses knowledge at birth is a superior being.' Only the saint, he thought, possessed inborn knowledge, which was why he urged the acquisition of knowledge through study. Mencius, for his part, believed that everyone on earth was intuitively endowed with a sense of what is good and he therefore saw all human beings as possessing inborn knowledge. That is why he urged them rather to 'seek within themselves'.

From as early as the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history, Confucius set about regulating social relations by advocating that 'each thing should be given its own name' and each person 'his own place'. In the Warring States period, Mencius took up this idea and elaborated upon it, urging educators to understand and respect the moral principles that must govern feudal society and relations between nobles and serfs, rich and poor, men and women, young people and old, and friends among themselves. In other words, Mencius' 'accomplishing one's duty at the risk of one's life' (*shesheng guyi*) echoed Confucius' 'sacrificing one's life through humanity' (*shashen chengren*).

When Mencius recommended that teaching methods should vary according to the different categories of pupils, he was also drawing upon Confucius' precept that teaching should be tailored to the aptitudes of each pupil. Where Mencius advised people to correct their mistakes and mend their ways, Confucius had already said: 'Anyone who has committed a fault must not be afraid to correct it.' It is thus clear that Confucius played an important part in the formation of Mencius' views on education. These ideas all exerted a considerable influence in the sphere of moral education.

## Mencius' role and influence

Mencius was a great educator of the Warring States period, and his influence was extremely

important. His thinking, like that of Confucius, had a fairly substantial impact outside China, and his position in the history of education in ancient China itself is outstanding. Some aspects of his work still influence the teaching methods used in China today, and some of his educational principles continue to inspire us. For two millennia, his appeal to ‘cultivate the nobility of the soul’ has met with an extraordinary response, giving many people the courage to be true to their convictions or even to sacrifice themselves for them. His advice that people should strengthen themselves by putting themselves to the test and should make good use of their talents is also extremely useful. Many people of goodwill, ardent patriots with the interests of the people at heart, have been inspired by his call to ‘accomplish one’s duty, at the risk of one’s life’. He advocated a number of extremely sound educational approaches, such as setting strict criteria and encouraging personal initiative, which bore fruit in the rigorous standards of Chinese education after him. He excelled at expressing abstract, complex ideas clearly, in just a few words, using vivid, precise metaphors. His advice was to put one’s whole heart and determination into one’s study and to devote all one’s attention to it. This scientific principle that Mencius drew from his practical experience of teaching 2,000 years ago is still observed to this day. When he said that teachers should love their work, take good care of their pupils, and set them an example, possess a vast store of knowledge and add to it constantly, he was stating precepts that have made a major contribution to the Chinese nation’s efforts in the field of education.

His recommendations to students—to consolidate what one has learned through individual study, aim to make steady progress, work without respite and put one’s whole heart into one’s study—together with his advice to teachers—to adapt teaching to suit each person’s aptitudes, set strict criteria, encourage personal initiative, express profound ideas in simple terms, and explain with the help of comparisons—combine to form a coherent system. This approach to teaching continues to exercise a profound influence in China and is still relevant today.

Just as Confucius is being rediscovered and his work subjected to fresh critical appraisal, so Chinese educators are continuing to sound the depths of Mencius’ doctrine. Many positive elements of his educational theory have found practical application in the classroom, even though historical circumstances have changed beyond recognition. The educational tradition of which Confucius and Mencius are the two great pillars is thus being perpetuated in China and in the rest of eastern Asia, with discernment and along new lines, as part of the modernization process now under way.

## Note

1. *Ge Zhengming (China)*. Graduate of the Nanjing (Nanking) Institute of Foreign Languages. Pursued a long career as a diplomat, translator, and teacher. Currently a member of the Association of Chinese Translators, assistant lecturer in the United States of America as a teacher of English as a second foreign language, co-ordinator of co-operation with foreign countries and head of the External Affairs Bureau at the Chinese Central Institute for Educational Research. Current interests include research on education in antiquity and in modern times. Recent publications include *Ao Hengli* [O. Henry] (1990), *Zhongxiaoxue kexue shiyan 200 li* [200 Examples of Scientific Experiments for Secondary and Primary Schools] (forthcoming), *Yingguo gudai gongye, nongye, jiaoyu jianshi* [A Brief History of Industry, Agriculture, and Education in the England of Yesteryear] (1991), and numerous periodical articles.

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