

The Moral Interpretation and Enlightenment of Mencius' Thoughts on Real Men

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Abstract: *Mencius proposed the idea of a great man with a complete theoretical framework as the foundation of life. Mencius not only explained the profound connotation of a great man, which is to live in benevolence, to establish propriety, to follow righteousness, not to be licentious, not to change, and not to yield, but also criticized the moral deviance of villains such as a mean man, a petty man, and a good man. "Living in the broadest place in the world, standing in the right position in the world, and following the great way in the world" reflects the moral ideal of a great man; "If you are successful, follow the people; if you are unsuccessful, follow your own way." reflects the code of conduct of a great man; "Wealth and honor cannot be licentious, poverty and humbleness cannot be changed, and power and force cannot bend." reflects the moral persistence of a great man. The moral enlightenment of the idea of a great man lies in: adhering to moral beliefs, correcting one's own role, and following the moral path; serving the people and self-cultivation; adhering to the moral bottom line, ideals and beliefs, and fairness and justice. In Chinese history, the idea of a great man has been recognized by many people of lofty ideals and has become a spiritual force to inspire national self-esteem and self-improvement. In today's era, everyone should deeply understand the idea of a real man and its implications, give full play to its due role in guiding personal growth, and set a benchmark for the moral cultivation of contemporary college students.*

Keywords: "Mencius", The idea of a real man, Moral interpretation, Enlightenment.

1. Introduction

Mencius's idea of a real man has always been a hot topic in the history of Chinese thought. During the Warring States Period when Mencius lived, the major vassal states began to win over other countries and attach importance to foreign strategies and alliances in order to expand their strength and dominate the vassal states. The vassal states successively appointed some strategists who were good at guessing and eloquent, and their words could influence the current situation and change the situation. Mencius refuted the image of a "real man" in the eyes of the strategists, and made a profound criticism of the personality integrity and moral character of the characters such as the humble man, the little man, and the good man of Qi, and expounded his own "real man" virtue in his conduct, which reflected the Confucianism's traditional upright and unique character.

2. The Main Content of the Thought of a Real Man in Mencius

The term "real man" appears three times in the whole book of Mencius, but Mencius did not give a clear definition of "real man". The initial discussion originated from the dialogue between Mencius and the strategist Jing Chun. "Teng Wengong Xia" describes the real man as follows: "Jing Chun said: 'Are Gongsun Yan and Zhang Yi not real men? When they get angry, the princes are afraid, and when they stay at peace, the world is quiet.'" Jing Chun is an admirer of the art of diplomacy. He said to Mencius: Gongsun Yan and Zhang Yi, aren't they real men? As long as they get angry, the whole court and the people of the world are terrified. When they calm down, the world is peaceful. Gongsun Yan and Zhang Yi both have a strong momentum. In the eyes of most people, they are eloquent, powerful, and can influence the political situation. They are the model of real men. But Mencius asked back: "How can they be real men?" In Mencius' eyes, Gongsun Yan and Zhang Yi can not be called real men. Their flattery and theft of power are not what a real man should do.

Instead, they are "the way of a concubine who takes obedience as the right thing to do." Mencius' words are full of contempt for Gongsun Yan and Zhang Yi. He believes that they only obey the orders of the princes, often ignore the safety of the people for their own selfish desires, and have no bottom line. After refuting Jingchun's remarks, Mencius immediately put forward the standard of a real man in his mind: "Occupy the broadest place in the world, stand in the right position in the world, and follow the great way of the world. If he succeeds, he will follow the people; if he fails, he will follow his own way. Wealth and honor cannot corrupt him, poverty and humbleness cannot move him, and power and force cannot bend him. This is what a real man should be." This has also become one of the basic contents of Chinese culture for thousands of years.

3. Moral Interpretation of the Thoughts of a Man in Mencius

3.1 The Moral Ideal of a Man

Regarding "living widely in the world, establishing the right position in the world, and walking the great road of the world", Zhao Qi said: "Living widely in the world means the world. The right position means the position of a man's pure Qian Zhengyang. The great road is the way of benevolence and righteousness [1]." Sun Shize said: "Mencius said that being able to live in the way of benevolence is the basis of the world, establishing etiquette is the right position of the world, and practicing righteousness is the road to the world [1]." Zhu Xi, an acting scholar of the Song Dynasty, explained: "Guangju means benevolence; upright position means etiquette; and Dao means righteousness [2]." Zhu Xi's explanation is not only in line with Mencius' original intention of "judging benevolence", but it is also concise and easy to understand. Here they correspond to the three moral norms of benevolence, propriety, and righteousness. Mencius' thoughts on masculinity particularly emphasized the importance of "benevolence". He inherited Confucius' thoughts of

“benevolent people love others” and “restraining oneself and restoring propriety is called benevolence”, and condensed the ethics and morality of a masculine man into “benevolence”. Firmly grasp the starting point of kindness - “benevolence”. Therefore, Mencius often said: “Benevolence is the human heart; righteousness is the way of human beings.” In Mencius’ view, benevolence is the foundation of the human heart, the inner driving force and source of moral behavior, and embodies the inherent emotional morality and individual behavior between individuals. moral relationship between them. A true man must live his life without losing his conscience. If he pursues wealth, fame and wealth blindly, he will lose his benevolence. In addition, Mencius also linked benevolence with righteousness, etiquette and other moral categories, emphasizing that etiquette is an external social norm, which specifies the responsibilities that everyone should perform and the behavioral norms to follow in society, and is the basis of benevolence and righteousness. specific form of expression. Righteousness is the moral principle that people should follow in life, that is, justice. This sense of justice protects the weak, drives away injustice, and promotes the formation of a more equitable social environment. It is the external code of conduct of benevolence. The three complement each other and together constitute the core content of Mencius’s thoughts on manhood. Therefore, in Mencius’ view, the first important point of a man’s thoughts is to be benevolent and righteous, observe etiquette and law, and practice morality. This is also the self-cultivation of a man before entering the world.

3.2 The Moral Code of a True Man

Regarding “If one is successful, he should follow the will of the people; if he is unsuccessful, he should follow his own path alone.” Sun Shi said: “If one is successful and becomes an official, he should follow the will of the people; if he is unsuccessful, he should retire and follow his own path alone without turning back [1].” Zhu Xi said: “If one is successful, he should follow the will of the people, and give what he has gained from others; if he is unsuccessful, he should retire and follow his own path alone without turning back [2].” Zhao Qi explained: “If one is successful, he should follow the right path and follow the will of the people; if he is unsuccessful, he should retire and follow his own path alone without turning back.”[1] This emphasizes the attitude of a true man in judging the situation in the process of entering the world. In the view of Confucianism, the fate of the individual and society are closely linked, and the success and glory of the individual should serve the overall welfare of society. Therefore, Mencius advocated that no matter where one is, whether one is rich or poor, or whether one is politically successful, one should make a difference. When you are successful in life, you should care about the people, benefit the people, and walk the road of prosperity with the people. This reflects a sense of responsibility and commitment to the world; when you are unsuccessful in life, you should stick to morality, never follow the crowd, and maintain your personality and integrity. This spirit of walking alone reflects noble moral self-discipline. This is what Mencius said in “The Doctrine of the Mean” that “when you are poor, you should be good to yourself, and when you are rich, you should be good to the world.” However, Mencius’s “when you are poor, you should be good to yourself” does not mean that you only seek

personal preservation in a chaotic situation and ignore the people and the country. Instead, he ruled the world with the spirit of “who else but me”, and shared the world’s joy and worry with the world, and breathed and shared the fate with the people. Mencius’s thought encourages people to have a sense of social responsibility and to maintain a firm will and noble sentiments when facing difficulties. Therefore, the second standard is that no matter whether you are successful or not, you should care about the world and stick to your principles. This is also the life experience of a real man after entering the world.

3.3 The Moral Perseverance of a Real Man

Regarding “Wealth and honor cannot corrupt him, poverty and humbleness cannot change him, and power and might cannot bend him,” Sun Shi said: “Even if he is rich and honored, it cannot corrupt his heart; even if he is poor and humble, it cannot change his behavior; even if he is powerful and mighty, it cannot bend his will. Only then can he be called a real man [1].” Zhu Xi said: “Lust corrupts his heart. Change changes his conduct. Bending frustrates his will [2].” Zhao Qi interpreted it as: “Lust corrupts his heart; change changes his conduct; and frustrates his will. Only when he is not confused by these three can he be called a real man [1].” This corresponds to the three moral norms of benevolence, propriety, and righteousness, and there are three different life situations of “wealth and honor,” “poverty and humbleness,” and “power and might,” respectively, which points out the personality and integrity of a “real man” when facing different life situations. For ordinary people, the above three situations are extremely severe tests. Mencius used the word “cannot” three times here in a row, aiming to emphasize that a real man should stick to his principles and bottom line no matter he is rich or poor, and should not be shaken by external factors. A real real man cannot be confused by status and wealth, cannot be changed by poverty and hardship, and cannot be succumbed by power and force. As the saying goes, “poverty does not change one’s spirit, and success does not change one’s ambition.” Mencius’s real manliness reflects his life integrity and moral responsibility of taking the world as his own responsibility, and is the ultimate manifestation of Confucius’ independent personality spirit and character of “the ambition of a man cannot be taken away.” Here, Mencius emphasized that the difficult environment is a tempering and test of a person’s will and character. Only by passing this test can one achieve the spirit of a strong real man. Therefore, the third standard is that external factors such as wealth, poverty, and power cannot confuse, shake, or succumb to him. This is also the principle of a real man’s conduct after entering the world.

These three standards are inherited from the same source and are connected internally and externally. Self-cultivation is the foundation, and behavior is the manifestation. It includes both the requirements for personal virtues and the assumption of social responsibilities. Together, they constitute the entire process of cultivating the idea of a real man. In Mencius’ view, only by achieving the above aspects can one be called a real man. Nowadays, with the changes in the times, environment, culture, and perspectives, the standards of a real man have also changed, and their connotations have different emphases. However, the moral requirements and social responsibilities

of a real man have always been the core of this thought and the key to its praise. (Moral ideals are the guiding principles of a real man's behavior, moral behavior is the concrete practice of a real man's moral ideals, and moral perseverance is the firm attitude and unchanging quality that a real man shows in the process of practicing moral ideals. The three together constitute the complete system of the real man thought advocated by Mencius.)

3.4 The Negative Personality of a Real Man

Mencius made a multi-dimensional interpretation of the idea of a real man. He not only praised the spirit of a real man from the positive side, but also criticized the low-level personalities such as "small man, cheap man, and Qi Liangren" from the negative side, making the connotation of a real man more profound and rich, and the image more vivid and three-dimensional. Regarding cheap men, Mencius used them to describe those unscrupulous and profiteers who were only interested in profit. "Mencius Gongsun Chou Xia" said: "In the ancient market, people exchanged what they had for what they didn't have, and the officials managed it. There was a cheap man who would definitely look for a dragon's edge and climb it, looking left and right, and making a profit in the market. Everyone thought he was cheap, so they followed him and punished him. The punishment of merchants from cheap men began from then on." It can be said that the "cheap men" described by Mencius are those who blindly pursue profit and lack moral self-discipline. Such people often do whatever it takes for their own selfish interests, betray their trust, disregard professional ethics, and wantonly trample on the bottom line of professional ethics. Not only does it disrupt the order of fair competition in the market, but it also seriously damages the social trust structure. As for the little husband, Mencius used it to describe those short-sighted and narrow-minded villains. "Mencius-Gongsun Chouxia" said: "Am I like a little husband? If I advise my lord and he does not accept it, I will be angry and sullen. If I leave, I will exhaust my strength and sleep all day long?" In Mencius' eyes, the little husband is those who are shallow-minded, lack moral confidence and self-discipline. They are short-sighted, lack sympathy and sense of responsibility, treat others coldly and ruthlessly, and even betray their trust in the face of interests, showing a dishonest attitude. As for Qi Liangren, Mencius used it to describe those villains who are greedy for vanity and have no ambition. "Mencius-Li Louxia" said: "Qi has a wife and a concubine and lives in the house... The reason why people seek wealth and fame is that his wife and concubine are not ashamed, and those who do not cry are rare." The Qi Liangren described by Mencius are those villains who are greedy for food, have no sense of responsibility, brag, and are shameless. That is to say, Mencius said, "People who eat and drink are despised by others, because they raise the small and lose the big." The behavior of people who eat and drink runs counter to the standard of a real man, destroys family virtues, and violates social ethics and personal morality.

4. The Moral Enlightenment of the Thought of a True Man in Mencius

4.1 Adhere to Moral Beliefs, Correct Your Own Role, and Follow the Moral Path

Mencius's idea of a great man believes that what a person does is governed by his beliefs. When a person acts, he should have lofty aspirations, live in benevolence and righteousness, and adhere to lofty moral beliefs. Only with firm moral beliefs can we follow the path. Mencius's idea of a great man, about "living in the vastness of the world", emphasizes that people should adhere to moral beliefs, be positive and kind, and educate contemporary people to always have a moral and benevolent heart, and be tolerant, restrained and caring when interacting with others. In real life, we should be kind and compassionate to people or things of different relationships. We should not only love our own relatives, but also "love the old and the young, love the old and the young of others", extend ourselves to others, love people, and even love things. For contemporary people, ideals guide the direction of life, and beliefs determine the success or failure of life. Only with lofty moral beliefs can we keep moving forward and gain something in life. The view of "establishing the right position in the world" teaches individuals to correct their own roles in life, treat people with courtesy, respect elders, and treat friends with kindness. Be honest and polite to others. No matter what position or environment others are in, you should show respect to them and not bully the weak. The thought of "walking the great way of the world" teaches individuals to follow the moral path, uphold justice, sacrifice their lives for justice, and not ignore the safety of others for personal interests. When others are in trouble, you should lend a hand instead of being indifferent and showing an attitude of indifference. In Mencius' eyes, to be a real man, you must first have the quality of adhering to moral beliefs, correct your own role, always follow the moral path, and achieve unity inside and outside, and consistency between words and deeds.

4.2 Serving the People and Self-cultivation

Mencius's idea of a man of high moral character advocates that a person with high moral character should "help the world" and closely link his personal future with the fate of the country. First of all, "If you are successful, you should follow the people" tells people that when they are successful in life, they should take on the responsibility and mission of serving the people. Mencius believed that the core of governing the country and stabilizing people's livelihood lies in benevolent government, and the realization of benevolent government depends on the monarch and leaders caring about the people's suffering and people's livelihood. Mencius repeatedly emphasized that "the people are the most important, the country is second, and the monarch is the least important", which means that when governing the country, the interests and well-being of the people should be given priority. This should be the case even in contemporary society. Everyone is a part of the motherland. As a member of the Chinese nation, the sons and daughters of China have an obligation to make their own contributions to the cause of the country and the development of the people in the process of striving for their personal careers. Especially in public affairs, they should stand on the side of the people, pay attention to the disadvantaged groups, and promote social fairness and justice. As the saying goes, "the rise and fall of the world is the responsibility of every man." Secondly, "If you are not successful, you should follow your own path" tells people that when you are frustrated in life, you should also maintain your moral integrity and focus on self-cultivation. Self-cultivation

is not only for personal inner perfection, but also for better fulfilling social responsibilities. Through inner cultivation, individuals can form firm moral judgment, profound social responsibility, and indomitable willpower. As Mencius said, "A real man lives in the thick, not in the thin; lives in the real, not in the flashy." This sentence reveals the moral cultivation and humble character that a real man should have when dealing with people and things, and also shows the inner strength and self-discipline that a person must have when assuming social responsibilities. Self-cultivation enables individuals to correctly handle the relationship between individuals and others, family and society, and the country and the world, and ensure that their behavior always conforms to moral norms.

4.3 Adhere to the Moral Bottom Line, Ideals and Beliefs, and Fairness and Justice

First, "wealth and honor cannot corrupt" emphasizes that the most fundamental reason why people are "people" lies in the bottom line of their moral judgment and behavioral norms. Especially when faced with the temptation of external interests, a true man should stick to his moral principles and maintain the independence and personality of his personality. The correct pursuit of values affects a person's future development direction. Especially in the complex contemporary social environment and the numerous bad temptations, if the correct values are lost and the truth, goodness and beauty in the heart are abandoned, it is very likely to go astray and cannot extricate oneself, and even affect the development of the entire society. Therefore, everyone should seriously understand the essence of Mencius's thought of a great man, cultivate their character, and cultivate the socialist core values proposed by the 18th National Congress. Secondly, "poverty and humbleness cannot move" shows that a great man should not only have personal moral cultivation, but also have lofty ideals and pursuits. In "Mencius·Teng Wengong Xia", Mencius mentioned: "The weather is not as good as the location, and the location is not as good as the harmony of people." The "harmony of people" here refers to the power of morality and the power of ideals. The ideals and beliefs of a man of honor not only refer to personal cultivation and goals, but also to influencing and improving society through morality and ideals, and ultimately realizing an ideal social system. Mencius believed that a man of honor with ideals and beliefs could eventually lead society to a fairer and more moral direction. This ideal and belief is not just an abstract philosophical theory, but is reflected in everyone and becomes the driving force for social progress. Finally, "power cannot bend" proves that Mencius attaches great importance to social fairness and opposes any form of exploitation and oppression. This "self-sustaining" spirit is the embodiment of the concept of fairness and justice of a man of honor, which requires a man of honor not only to be fair in personal terms, but also to always maintain fairness and justice in social terms. In the face of social injustice, a man of honor must have the courage to speak out, defend justice, correct inequality, and become a defender of social morality and justice.

In short, the thought of a man of honor in Mencius is the essence of China's excellent traditional culture, shining with indelible brilliance, and provides valuable ideological

resources and practical guidance for contemporary education. In the process of promoting moral construction and moral education, we should deeply explore the educational value of the ideological resources of the real man, reactivate the real man spirit, give full play to its due role in guiding the process of modern moral education, and continuously promote personal development and social progress.

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