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COMMENT ON “THE INFLUENCE OF MENCIUS’ HUMANISM AND BENEVOLENT GOVERNMENT ON CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY”

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As the cornerstone of Confucianism, Mencius’ theories not only form the backbone of this philosophical system, but also hold a significant position within China’s longstanding history, representing an integral part of its traditional culture. Mencius inherited the teachings of Confucius, innovatively expanded upon them, and formulated a unique set of thoughts and theories. Confucius’ teachings and Mencius’ contributions have together shaped the framework of Confucianism, establishing the “Tao of Confucius and Mencius” as the guiding principles for the Chinese nation throughout millennia. Among Mencius’ theories, his ideas on benevolent government and people-centeredness stand out prominently, capturing the scholars and researchers’ attention. These concepts also serve as the focal point of the author’s study in the article.

Yang (2024) conducts an in-depth exploration of Mencius’ benevolent government, scrutinizing its measures and objectives in economic and educational contexts. However, it is crucial to underscore that Mencius’ theory of benevolent government is not confined solely to these domains. His perspective extends beyond economic and educational considerations

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to encompass a comprehensive set of political views, specifically addressing warfare and delineating the expectations imposed upon rulers in their governance.

The era in which Mencius lived, known as the Warring States Period, was marked by turmoil and instability. The people's lives were akin to grass, easily trampled upon. The Emperor Zhou's authority had diminished to a mere title, leaving the country fragmented. Princes engaged in constant power struggles, resulting in pervasive conflicts. This period witnessed profound transformations across politics, culture and the economy. The prolonged warfare took a severe toll, leading to a laborers' significant loss and a rapid decline in social productivity. Mencius vividly depicted the horrors of war in his work *Li Lou I*, stating, "In the pursuit of land, the countless lives lost are scattered across the battlefield; in the conquest of cities, the countless lives lost fill the streets. This is akin to a monstrous act, a crime so heinous that even the punishment of death would be inadequate" (Wang, 2019, p. 85). This quote demonstrates both the brutality of the war and Mencius' vehement condemnation of those responsible for instigating it. Amidst such dire circumstances, the people yearned desperately for a unifying ruler who could bring an end to the chaotic warfare and alleviate their suffering. It was within this social context that Mencius proposed the political ideal of "protecting the people and becoming king." He envisioned a sagacious monarch who, grounded in benevolence and righteousness, would establish a benevolent government, prioritize the people's welfare, unify the realm and bring an end to the ongoing conflicts.

Mencius held the belief that benevolent governance necessitated respect for virtuous individuals and the people's empowerment. According to Mencius, the virtuous and benevolent individuals' presence could bring prosperity and strength to a nation, whereas a lack of belief, in such individuals, would result in emptiness within the country. An example, illustrating this point, is the story of "three families partitioning Jin" during the late Spring and Autumn Period. Mencius attributed this division result to the unworthy individuals appointed by the Jin monarchs. When a king holds respect for the deserving, he actively avoids flatterers and appoints virtuous individuals to positions of authority while allowing talented individuals to contribute. It creates an environment where "all the people in the world will be happy and willing to serve in the court." The talented individuals' presence in positions of authority allowed for the resolution of external conflicts and the implementation of policies that would bring stability and benefit to the people. By effectively addressing internal and external challenges, and utilizing this time to amend laws and govern diligently, even the most formidable rival would undoubtedly be apprehensive. Mencius advocated for the talented individuals' merit-based appointment, disregarding their family backgrounds and focusing solely on their abilities. This represented a significant ideological shift during that time. Mencius stated, "Shun cultivated the land, Fu Yue worked as a skilled mason, Jiao Bian engaged in the trade of selling fish and salt, Guan Yiwu was rescued from the prison officer's hands and then appointed, Sun Shu'ao was selected from his seclusion by the seaside, and Baili Xi was redeemed from the slave market and appointed for service" (Wang, 2019,

p. 126). Despite their humble origins, their subsequent contributions to the nation and the world were substantial. Furthermore, Mencius further advocated that “individuals occupying high positions should embody benevolence. Such benevolent leaders would naturally extend kindness and righteousness to those under their rule, setting a virtuous example. In this scenario, the issuance of decrees becomes unnecessary, as the people, influenced by the inherent goodness of their leaders, would act with good intentions. Conversely, if leaders lacking benevolence exploit the people for their selfish gains, causing suffering and discontent, it would inevitably become a topic of discussion among the populace.” This perspective from Mencius posed a direct challenge to the prevailing hereditary system of that era.

Mencius’ philosophy, with its emphasis on the people’s centrality, is intricately linked to the concept of benevolent governance. His notion of “benevolent government” can be viewed as a comprehensive framework centered around prioritizing the people’s well-being. Being people-oriented entails placing the populace’s needs and perspectives at the forefront, addressing their concerns, and actively addressing their immediate needs, making the citizens’ hardships a focal point of the ruler’s attention.

Even before Mencius, there existed a notion that “[...] the people are the foundation of the country, and a strong foundation leads to a peaceful nation” (Chen, 2019, p. 52). However, rulers traditionally perceived the people as humble and low-ranking individuals deserving of minimal respect. Mencius succinctly conveyed the revolutionary idea that “the people are the most valuable, the country is the second most valuable, and the king is the least important” (Wang, 2019, p. 152). In these few words, Mencius articulated a progressive relationship among the people, the nation and the ruler. He underscored that the most crucial and precious element in a country is its people. The nation’s prosperity, value and existence hinge on its citizens’ well-being, thereby assigning significance to the monarch’s role.

Within the framework of patriarchal traditions, the monarch is often regarded as the heaven’s earthly representative, and ministers are expected to align with the monarch’s will. Mencius, however, departed from this tradition by emphasizing the idea that “those who win the hearts of the people will win the world, and those who lose the hearts of the people will lose the world.” He advocated that the king must attentively heed public opinion before making decisions. Mencius believed that public opinion should be a guiding force in various aspects of governance. Decisions about war, for instance, should be influenced by public sentiment, and the ministers’ appointment should also be based on the people’s collective opinion. When King Hui of Liang sought Mencius’ advice on determining the competence of those appointed to assist him, Mencius offered a nuanced perspective. He suggested that when individuals close to the king, as well as all officials, concur that someone is virtuous, it should not be blindly accepted. Instead, Mencius proposed a more cautious approach: only when the consensus among the people supports the person’s worthiness, the king should

carefully observe and confirm the individual's virtue before making an appointment. This, according to Mencius, represents the most reliable method of governance.

Moreover, Mencius enriched ancient Chinese political and ethical culture by emphasizing the importance of sharing the people's joys and sorrows. In the context of governance, it was customary for the king, as the country's head, to partake in activities, such as singing, dancing and feasting. This practice was considered acceptable during Mencius's era and continued in many subsequent situations. During the tumultuous Warring States Period, kings faced significant concerns, such as failing to pay tribute, losing territory and experiencing military defeats. King Hui of Wei, for instance, expressed distress over being bullied by the armed forces of major powers, a sentiment that Mencius found dissatisfactory. Mencius unequivocally asserted, "If you enjoy the happiness of the people, the people will also enjoy their happiness; if you worry about the worries of the people, the people will also worry about their worries. You should be happy with the world, and be worried with the world" (Wang, 2019, p. 16).

Collectively, Mencius's trinity of principles "the people value the monarch", "respecting public opinion" and "sharing the joys and sorrows of the people" form the foundation of a "people-oriented" political and ethical culture. This concept is closely intertwined with patriarchal traditions and the politics of "governing the people" under the patriarchal system. Mencius's ethical culture represents a significant historical progression, offering a stark contrast to the prevailing norms of his time.

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