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Mencius' Impact on the History of Chinese classical Scholarship from the Perspective of Learning

Introduction

Mencius is regarded as the representative figure of Confucianism in the pre-Qin period, after Confucius and before Xunzi. However, compared to Confucius' thirst for knowledge, Mencius' approach to learning was more internalised and less externally knowledge oriented. As the second sage (*Yasheng* 亞聖), this shift in emphasis had a significant impact on the subsequent history of scholarship and thought. This paper will analyse Mencius' attitude towards learning and its impact on the history of Chinese classical scholarship.

Confucius' Learning Attitude

As the founder of Confucianism and the most holy teacher who compiled the Six Classics, Confucius was deeply concerned with the issue of learning. In the *Analects*, "learning" is repeatedly referred to. For example, in the *Analects* Chapter 1, in Legge's translation: "Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?" 學而時習之，不亦說乎;¹ the *Analects* Chapter 2: "Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous" 學而不思則罔，思而不學則殆;² the *Analects* Chapter 5: "He was of an active nature and yet fond of learning, and he was not ashamed to ask and learn of his inferiors" 敏而好學，不恥下問;³ and Chapter 8: "Learn as if you could not reach your object, and were always fearing also lest you should lose it" 學如不及，猶恐失之.⁴ All of these words emphasise the importance of acquiring knowledge. According to the statistics given in the appendix of Yang Bojun's *Lunyu yizhu*, 論語譯註, "learn" (學) as a real word appeared 64 times,⁵ which is second only to "humane" (仁) as a core word.⁶ In addition, there are many more teachings in the *Analects* that do not contain the word "learn" but have the same meaning, such as in Chapter 6: "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it" 知之者不如好之者，好之者不如樂之者⁷ and Chapter 7: "When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them" 三人行，必有我師焉；擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之.⁸ There are simple exhortations as well as profound approaches to learning, many of which have become aphorisms that have been passed down to us. Mencius, the second Confucian master after

¹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. 1* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2010), p. 137.

² James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. 1* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 150.

³ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. 1* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 178.

⁴ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. 1* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 213.

⁵ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu Yizhu* 論語譯註 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press 中華書局, 2009), p. 298.

⁶ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu Yizhu* 論語譯註 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press 中華書局, 2009), p. 219.

⁷ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. 1* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 191.

⁸ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. 1* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 202.

Confucius, appears to have been less concerned with “learning” than Confucius. He does not begin with a systematic discussion of this subject as Xunzi did, nor does he speak of learning as frequently as Confucius did. *Mencius* is some 38,000 words long, which is more than twice the length of the *Analects*. However, Mencius used the word “learn” only 33 times, which is half the number used in the *Analects*.

Mencius’ Learning Attitude

It is worth noting that Confucius’ learning is primarily the acquisition of knowledge, there are external learning objects, which could be classical texts, such as the *Documents* 尚書 and the *Poems* 詩, or figures, as Confucius had said: “When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers” 三人行必有我師⁹ and Xunzi also declared that “In learning, no method is of more advantage than to be near a man of learning” 學莫便乎近其人.¹⁰ As can be seen in Xunzi’s chapter “An Exhortation to Learning” 勸學篇, he commendably inherited and developed Confucius’ attitude towards learning. However, Mencius’ discourse suggests, whether intentionally or unintentionally, that learning should be an inward and mind-returning process. In other words, Mencius believed that pursuing morality internally and returning to the heart was more important than seeking knowledge externally. Witness in *Mencius* Chapter Gaozi, in Legge’s translation: “Benevolence, righteousness, propriety[i.e, ritual], and knowledge are not infused into us from without. We are certainly furnished with them” 仁義禮智，非由外鑠我也，我固有之;¹¹ “I am skilful in nourishing my vast, flowing passion-nature” 我善養吾浩然之氣.¹² Mencius proposed that everyone possesses “the feeling of commiseration”, “the feeling of shame and dislike”, “the feeling of modesty and complaisance” and “the feeling of approving and disapproving”, and then further explained that “Let them have their complete development, and they will suffice to love and protect all within the four seas. Let them be denied that development, and they will not suffice for a man to serve his parents with” 苟能充之，足以保四海；苟不充之，不足以事父母.¹³ This view of discovering essential goodness in one’s own heart pervades almost all of Mencius’ teachings, and represents a significant departure from Confucius’ emphasis on ritualistic practise. David B. Honey summarizes this issue in his book *A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship* Volume I in a truthful manner: “With the career of Mencius, we see a departure from the heavy emphasis of Confucius on the socialization of ethics and the proper performance of the rites toward the internalization of morality, including the process of self-cultivation on the level of the mind and the *qi*.”¹⁴

In fact, Mencius’ attitude towards learning is consistent with his theory that “human nature is good” 性善論. He emphasised that humans are intrinsically good, and that in order to achieve the highest level of benevolence or to become a saint, one must constantly sweep away the interference from external objects and restore the goodness of human nature. Thus, from this standpoint, attaining goodness through learning appears less important. This may

⁹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. I* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 202.

¹⁰ Translated into English by John Knoblock, *Library of Chinese Classics: Xunzi* (Hunan: Hunan People’s Publishing House 湖南人民出版社, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 外文出版社, 1999), p.16-17.

¹¹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. II* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 403.

¹² James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. II* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 189.

¹³ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. II* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 203.

¹⁴ David B. Honey, *A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship: Volume I* (Washington: Academica Press, 2021), p. 293.

explain why Mencius did not emphasise learning in general as Confucius and Xunzi did. Mencius' direct discussion of learning is pitifully brief, with only two quotes illustrating it, in Legge's translation: "The great end of learning is nothing else but to seek for the lost mind" 學問之道無他, 求其放心而已矣¹⁵ and "In learning extensively and discussing minutely what is learned, the object of the superior man is that he may be able to go back and set forth in brief what is essential" 博學而詳說之, 將以反說約也.¹⁶ The preceding sentence is a powerful conclusion brought out by Mencius through a vivid and imaginative metaphor, which is highly consistent with the tone of his previous thought in the original text. Although the latter phrase seems to be a traditional Confucian approach to learning, it is still indicative of Mencius' preference for concise expressions of meaning over lengthy textual proofs.

Furthermore, Mencius' use of the *Poems* demonstrated his interpretive learning attitude. David B. Honey has elaborated on this in his book, and here is an excerpt from his quote from Yang Zebo: "Yang Zebo's summary of what it means to 'engage this intention with one's own faculties' is that 'it is to grasp the intent and emotions of the author in composing his work through employing the readers' own impressions, experiences, and understanding.'" ¹⁷ For Mencius, his "understanding" was his theory of benevolent government(仁政) and kingly way(王道).

Impact on the History of Classical Scholarship

Therefore, what impact has Mencius' attitude to learning as a sage had on the history of classical scholarship? First and foremost, we must recognise that this is a transformation and development based on Confucius' teachings. David B. Honey has an excellent comment on this, he stated: "The issue, of course, is the overall emphasis Mencius places on the inner psychology of moral commitment versus the traditional attention paid to outer ritualized behavior."¹⁸ This emphasis seems fine given Mencius' unpopular status at the time and kindness needed to be encouraged, as well as when he and Xunzi are listed together in the biographies of *The Records of the Grand Historian* written by Sima Qian in Han dynasty. But with the rise of New Text Movement, Mencius' attitude of "in the service of exemplar historiography" (this describe originated from the title of Chapter 10 of A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship, Volume 1) and learning approach appears to have provided a precedent for the New Text classicists' future political use of the classics and subjective interpretation of Confucian texts.

Although ancient scholars had regarded Mencius as the second sage since the Eastern Han Dynasty, his writings were not initially included in the imperial canons. Thus Mencius' influence on the classical scholarship was remained in a normal condition until Tang dynasty. During the Tang dynasty, when Buddhism and Taoism were dominant, Han Yu advanced the theory of Confucian orthodoxy in defence of Confucianism, elevating Mencius to the ranks of Confucian orthodoxy and demeaning Xunzi; as a result, the situation began to shift: Mencius was increasingly valued by scholars, while Xunzi gradually faded from view.

¹⁵ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. II* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 414.

¹⁶ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. II* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 323.

¹⁷ David B. Honey, *A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship: Volume I* (Washington: Academica Press, 2021), p. 316.

¹⁸ David B. Honey, *A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship: Volume I* (Washington: Academica Press, 2021), p. 294.

Mencius was finally canonised as one of the Thirteen Classics during the Song dynasty. Mencius' attitude towards learning became more prominent in the academic community by this time, as his status and authority grew dramatically. Han Yu 韓愈, who wanted to defend Confucianism, had never anticipated the following consequence would be so counterintuitive—Having lost the balancing effect of Xunzi's text-based learning approach, his veneration for Mencius provided a fertile breeding ground for Neo-Confucianism, causing classical scholarship to deviate from Confucian tradition and enter a bizarre situation. Scholars of Neo-Confucianism developed an inward-looking approach to learning based on Mencius' theory of good human nature, and it seems that the teaching of Mencius that “The ability possessed by men without having been acquired by learning is intuitive ability, and the knowledge possessed by them without the exercise of thought is their intuitive knowledge” 人之所不學而能者，其良能也；所不慮而知者，其良知也 were taken to the extreme by Wang Yangming 王陽明,¹⁹ who founded a new academic school known as the Study of the Mind in Ming Dynasty. He took Zen theory to Mencius' emphasis on the mind, encouraging enlightenment, to the point of overstating and being unprofitable. Although Mencius was formally bestowed with the royal crown of the second sage (*Yasheng* 亞聖) during the Yuan dynasty, this honour came at the expense of bringing the history of classical scholarship to a halt.

Fortunately, from the late Ming Dynasty onward, from Liu Zongxiu to Gu Yanwu, everyone became increasingly aware of the drawbacks of discussing the mind while ignoring textual studies. They began to criticise Song and Ming scholarship and turned to canonical text study, annotation, and examination in an attempt to restore the Han style of scholarship. During the Qing dynasty, a vast army of Old Text scholars, including a large number of outstanding philologists and phonologists emerged. At this point, the negative impact of Mencius' ideas on learning is finally over.

Conclusion

Mencius played a crucial role in the transmission of Confucius' thought. However, in terms of the development of the history of Chinese classical scholarship, as he did not fully transmit Confucius' attitude towards learning, in the meantime, intersperse with many creative interpretations and philosophy, so that later generations have been able to exploit this minor differences to produce results far away from how it should be.

¹⁹ James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: Vo. II* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2010), p. 456.

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