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English Review of Dissertation

My master's thesis title is "A Comparative Study on Mencius and Plato's Virtue Theories". However, at the earliest stage of preparation, the title of the original plan was "Fate Theory in the Middle Warring States Period". Next, I will explain the change in the research direction.

In May of 2023, we started the preparation stage of our graduation thesis, and I chose "Mencius" to be my intensive study object. Therefore, in July, I read a lot of academic papers related to "Mencius" to find the right entry point. I communicated a lot with my advising professor via emails. At the same time, I also read books such as "Chinese Aesthetics", "History of Chinese Philosophy" and "On the History of Ancient Chinese Thought" to supplement my observation of the diachronic nature of ancient Chinese thought. At that time, I was quite interested in the two central arguments of Mencius' thought. One is "nature" theory, namely the so-called theory of original goodness of human nature, and the other is "fate" theory. After reporting these two ideas to my advising professor, Professor Huang Chung-tian, he thought there were too many scholars who studied on the topic of "theory of original goodness of human nature", and it was very hard for me to write some new ideas at my current academic stage. The "fate" theory is relatively kind to me, though this is actually a difficult proposition to grasp. I told my teacher my own thoughts. I thought the writing of the master's thesis was not only to complete a thesis, but also a process of learning and improvement. For me, the most important thing in the process of master's thesis research was to dig deep into the topics that I was interested in to improve my ability in academic research during the preparation period of about half a year. My teacher also agreed with me in this regard, so he allowed me to further explore the theme of "fate" theory. After reading the related papers and in-depth discussion with other seniors who have studied related fields, I decided to lock the time range in the middle Warring States Period. If researched this range, I could

analyze Guodian Chu Slips and other unearthed materials, jump out of the framework of “Mencius” and compare the observations and statements of fate theory of different schools in the same period, so as to put forward some distinctive arguments.

When it came to early September, 2023, I formally prepared to start writing my thesis. Combined with several key points put forward by my adviser, diachronic observation and synchronic observation were integrated into the initial framework of my thesis. In the initial plan, I prepared to first summarize the changes in fate theory in the pre-Qin period, then unfold the discussion around “Mencius” and Guodian Chu Slips, the two most important literature in the middle Warring States Period, and then discuss the other ideologists’ thoughts about fate theory and compare them, and finally draw the main body and conclusions of fate theory in the middle Warring States Period. Moving forward according to this idea, I came to the specific writing stage, but found many difficulties. First, the time boundary of the middle Warring States Period is still a dispute in the academic circle. Second, it is very hard to clearly describe the fate theory in the pre-Qin period in less than 2000-3000 words, but a rough description will make this paragraph lack argumentation. Besides, the discussion that is mainly based on “Mencius” and Guodian Chu Slips will fuzzy the time nature of the thesis, making it stay in the theories of Zisi-Mencius School. However, if I add the other ideologists’ thoughts of fate theory to the thesis, the article volume will be out of control. Therefore, at the initial stage of thesis writing, the part of Mencius’ fate thought could not be finished in 10,000 words. So I immediately consulted the teacher on how to solve the difficult problem.

In mid-January, 2024, in an online discussion with my teacher, he clearly pointed out that this topic had a high requirement of time. If the time was determined to be the middle Warring States Period, I couldn’t just take the material of Zisi-Mencius school as the main body, but should summarize the similarity and difference of the conception of fate theory in that era after researching all the thoughts of different schools in this period. This idea was contrary to my original idea of taking Mencius as the core of my research. However, my teacher’s other suggestion inspired me a lot, namely I should conduct a comparative study on the fate theory of Western and

Eastern ideologists in the Axial Age. For example, the fate thought of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. By doing so, the convergence and comparison of Chinese and Western thoughts would make my thesis more stereoscopic, and it was easier to draw some novel and distinctive conclusions. My mind suddenly opened widely. I thought I could expand the space and time of the middle Warring States Period, not limited to ancient China, and compared with the thoughts of ancient Greek ideologists at a similar period. My teacher said I should change my thesis title into “The Similarities and Differences of the Axis Age ideologists’ Thoughts on Fate”, but later, he thought this title was too grand for me to write my master’s thesis. So he let me keep studying on my own idea.

At that time, my research target has become too broad. On the one hand, in order to align and compare the specific thought theories of Chinese and Western ideologists corresponding to time, I had to determine the time range of the middle Warring States Period. On the other hand, no matter ancient China or ancient Greek, I had to cursorily read and roughly summarize the thoughts and theories of the ideologists of the corresponding period. Hence, during that time, I kept reading material about the history of Western thought, the history of Western philosophy, and thoughts of the Axial Age, trying to find the right entry point.

Just when I was madly busy, my other teacher, Chen Sufan, found me and talked with me about the thesis. I told her my plight. She soon found the key problem and told me I shouldn’t bite off more than I could chew. Rather than casting a wide net to learn a little about every ideologist, it was better to pick out two Chinese and Western ideologists and compare their theories, so that the article can be more focused. I was immediately enlightened by her words. In the process of expanding academic research, I didn’t realize that my research subject had strayed too far. Actually, it couldn’t focus on an academic issue for good discussion and research. Hence, under the teacher’s guidance, I returned to my earliest study of Mencius, and chose Plato as a comparison object, because his position in the history of Western philosophy is comparable to that of Mencius in Chinese ideological history. After confirming the research target, I reconsidered whether the fate theory was a suitable target for comparison. After

reading Plato's works and related papers, I felt that the concept of fate may not be a good comparison target. So I newly sorted out the thought systems of Plato and Mencius, and found that "virtue" was a good comparison target. On the one hand, Mencius had the so-called four virtues theory —benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom, and Plato also had the four main virtues theory — "wisdom, bravery, temperance, justice". On the other hand, their societies faced similar difficulties, and they all hoped to use virtue to put their country and society back on track. However, there are obvious differences in the concrete content and ideological source of the virtue theory, so I thought this would be a good entry point and comparison object. Hence, my thesis title was changed to "A Comparative Study on Mencius and Plato's Virtue Theories" after reporting to my advising professor.

After redetermining my selected topic, I proceeded to examine the virtue theories in the works of Mencius and Plato at once. Though the selected topics have been completely modified, the work I did before this was not entirely useless. After our last course ended and we officially started researching our master's thesis, I spent around a month reviewing the entire scriptures of Mencius in a bid to get an in-depth study of the original scriptures. Of course, at that time, the emphasis was mainly on the theme of "fate". During this period, however, the reorganization of the original scriptures also laid a good foundation for my future classification of Mencius's thoughts on virtue. So, with regard to Plato's thoughts, I also read his "The Republic of Plato", "Meno", among others around mid-January, and also referred to some relevant theses. Thus, even though the theme of the thesis had changed less than a fortnight before, the preparation I had made beforehand had helped me to pass the initial phases of material collection and analysis commendably.

In order, then, to make a formal comparative study of the virtue thoughts of Mencius and Plato, I have adopted the approach of writing and setting forth their theories and ideas separately. As a matter of fact, comparative studies are not a research category that can be easily mastered. This requires a deeper understanding of the two subjects being compared. Furthermore, a comparative study requires an appropriate principal axis as the object of comparison. During the time of the oral

defense, Professor Chen Fengyuan pointed out that the simple comparison of the two great ideologists, Mencius and Plato, was not justified. The right thing to do is to take the theory of one ideologist as the principal axis, and then compare it with the philosophy of another. Only then will the subject matter be clear and the discussion be more meaningful and valuable. And as someone who is doing this kind of research for the first time, I have relatively taken it for granted that I am comparing the virtue theories of the two ideologists separately, which, from my current point of view, is indeed problematic.

Though there were some defects in the way the comparisons were made, in the end, the core parts were stated just as well and certain conclusions were drawn after the comparisons. In an effort to facilitate a final comparison, I have divided the virtue thoughts of Mencius and Plato into the identical four sections for their respective organization and discussion. They are, respectively, the origin of the idea of virtue theory, the foundation of virtue theory, the definition of virtue theory, and the main body content of virtue theory.

The first part is the origin of the virtue theory thought. The origin of Mencius's moral thoughts is relatively clear as regards the origin of the thoughts of the virtue theory. I started with the evolution of the character pattern and word meaning of "virtue", and then studied the occurrences of the word "virtue" in pre-Qin classics to clarify how its definition has changed over different stages. The primary difficult point lies in defining Confucius's definition of virtue. Whether there was a conception of virtue in the time of Confucius. Some scholars argue that at that time there was no conception of virtue (metaphysical), only the conception of virtuous conduct; others, however, believe that the conception of virtue was already in existence at that time. Then, after sorting through all the scriptures related to virtue in the "Analects of Confucius", I believe that the conception of virtue was not the principal axis of Confucius' moral thoughts. He was more concerned with the virtuous conduct of his pupils and those around him. However, the emergence of the idea of virtue can be seen in some of the scriptures, which is also one of the important sources of Mencius's thought of virtue. The source of Plato's virtue thought is much more

complicated. Whether it is the qualities of the heroes and gods of Greek mythology, or the discussion of morality by a lot of ancient Greek philosophers before the time of the Socratic. Of course, it also included Socrates' discourse on "virtue is knowledge". I have recorded them one by one. Ultimately, only a few core parts of the thesis were retained due to word limits.

The second part is the foundation of virtue theory, which is one of the key points to compare the two ideologists' virtue theory thoughts. Mencius's virtue theory is based on the theory of original goodness of human nature, while Plato's virtue theory is based on the soul theory. By this time, the previous preparation for Mencius's theory of original goodness of human nature could be put to good use, which helped me complete the relevant discussion quickly. Plato's soul theory was relatively less easy to understand, and it needed to be discussed while completely combining with Plato's four main virtues theory. The specific unfolding and expanding process will be stated in the next section.

The third part is the definition of virtue theory. Because Mencius liked to discuss virtue and fate together, I also extracted the concept of "fate" from "Mencius", hoping to make the concept of "virtue" in Mencius' thoughts more clear through interpretation and mutual comparison of the concepts of "virtue" and "fate". In the classic work "Mencius", there is not only the true virtue of benevolence, righteousness and morality, but also the so-called animals' virtue. However, in the process of specific discussion, I got some criticism from the teachers because the discussion was not rigorous enough. Soon afterwards, in the thesis revision stage, I spent a lot of time and effort in greatly modifying the content of this part, hoping to embody and clarify the basic concepts of "virtue" and "fate" in my thesis. Relatively speaking, the research on Mencius was a more familiar field and scope for me, and Plato's definition of "virtue" was absolutely another strange field for me. Particularly, he often expressed his definition of virtue through the mouth of Socrates. Therefore, in my thesis, I planned to carry out the discussion around the core questions, such as whether virtue can be taught, hoping to clarify his definition of virtue.

The last part is to sort out the main body content of their virtue theories. I was

relatively familiar with Mencius's four virtues theory, or, the four sources theory, so I discussed righteousness, propriety and wisdom, respectively, while taking benevolence as the core. Because I was relatively unfamiliar with Plato's four main virtues theory, I spent a lot of time understanding his definition of the four main virtues and the theory's impact on society at that time. As I said before, Plato's four main virtues theory is discussed while closely being bound together with his soul theory. So after understanding the basic connotation expressed by his soul theory, it would be very easy to understand the connotation of the four main virtues theory naturally. At the same time, combined with the context of Plato's time, I also found that the four virtues — wisdom, bravery, temperance, justice, are not merely a moral requirement for a person. Plato's soul theory divides people into three parts. Wisdom, bravery and temperance represent the head, chest and lower body, which respectively correspond to human reason, passion, and desire. Justice is the product of the unification of these three parts. At the macro level, in his discussion in "The Republic of Plato", I also found that this is his different moral requirements for different classes. Wisdom corresponds to the ruling class, bravery to the warrior, temperance to the common people, and justice is the product that formed by the three classes after they have performed their functions perfectly in a city. Hence, Plato's four main virtue thought has actually achieved a subtle unity at both the micro and macro levels.

After completing the work described above, I started comparing and discussing the relevant ideas of the two ideologists in the frame of the above four sections. An obvious defect is that although the differences and similarities between the two ideologists are indeed discussed in the end, it is still difficult to judge the pros and cons, because they lived in different environments, educated in different ways, had different sources of thoughts, and the social problems that need to be solved are even more different. But the value of such comparisons is to sort out the differences and commonalities of values between Eastern and Western civilizations through such research, which is also one of our missions that we should undertake as a student of the Academy of Sinology.

In the whole course of my thesis research, I deeply felt the hardships of academic

research. Many academic questions cannot be answered simply by studying them, and you will meet different difficulties and challenges in the process of advancing. With my current academic accumulation and reserves, there are too many problems that cannot be properly handled. In addition, the research subjects should not be too complex, otherwise, it's very easy to be trapped in a chaotic situation, and hard to find out the core points to conduct analysis. However, even if the research topic is finally abandoned, the efforts made in the research process will not be wasted, especially the basic work that can be applied to the subsequent new research topic. In the past, when Professor Zhu Jianing discussed the paper with us, he often mentioned that we should have the “little turtle spirit” in academic research — not afraid of hitting a wall; dare to try; stick to your research, and you will finally reap the harvest. This time, my research process also greatly proved Professor Zhu's viewpoint. In my future academic path, I will also encourage myself to keep forging ahead with his words.