

Contemporary Significance of Educational Practice of Confucius and Mencius

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Received: 25 August 2024; Accepted: 14 September 2024; Published: 25 September 2024

Abstract:

As the founders of Chinese Confucianism, Confucius and Mencius were both great thinkers and great educators. They were also the cultural giants of the East in the world, for they had made outstanding contributions to the whole human civilizations with their brilliance of thoughts and creative educational practices. Their thoughts and ideas had transcended Times and Ages, spanned across regions and national borders, and also had influenced China and the world for thousands of years. Today, when we are living in the era of globalization and informational revolution, thinking about our human development and looking forward to the future of education as a whole, it was also necessary to look back more than 2,000 years ago and drew wisdom and nutrition from the educational thoughts and practices of Confucius and Mencius.

Keywords:

Confucius and Mencius, Educational Practice, Educational Thoughts, The Innovative Spirit

1. Introduction

Confucius was born in the late Spring and Autumn Period, while Mencius lived in the middle era of the Warring States. Their educational practices and historical contributions were not only the products of the culture of that time, but also had closer related to the cultural ecology and development and revolution of that times. So if we should analyze the characteristics of that times, political culture and social ecology, the three parts would be the important parts of the historical analysis of Confucius and Mencius' thoughts.

In the five-thousand-year history of Chinese civilization, the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period were a special historical period that greatly influenced the development process of Chinese history, determined that construction of national culture and led the development direction of Chinese civilization. Now, more and more people in the academic circle agree with the viewpoint of the "axis era" of world civilization put forward by the German scholar Jaspers: "the central axis of history seems to have been developed in the midst of a spiritual process that took place around 500 BC, between 800 and 200 BC. It was during that period that we

encountered the more profound historical dividing line, and ‘man’ as we know today was formed. We may refer to this period simply as the Axis Age.” [1]

Jaspers paid great attentions on the cultural phenomena of the world’s major ancient civilizations in this period. He here believed that this period was full of extraordinary events: In China Confucius and Laozi were living; In India, it was the time of Yuponisha and Buddha; In Persia, Zoroastrinanism made its challenging arguments.....In Palestine, Elijah, Isaiah, Jareemiah; Greece gave birth to Homer and Plato. “ They all appeared separately and almost simultaneously in China, India and the West within a few centuries.” It was worth our attention here, in Jaspers’ discourse, he paid particular attention on China. It could be said that China was an important historical basis in his account of what he called the “Axia Age”.

Here, the “Axia Age” referred to the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States(770BC---221BC), which period was also known as “Axis Era” in the history and development of Chinese civilization.

Now, if we should compare the Periods of Spring and Autumn and Warring States in which Confucius and Mencius lived with today’s worlds, we would find that although these two periods were 2,000 years apart and there were huge differences in the social nature and level of development , many respects were similar in forms or even in spirit in terms of characteristics of the Times and Cultures, and also there were considerable commonality and compatibility. There were amazing phenomena of “Resurrection” in the history of the world. There were many scholars in both East and West who had argued that the modern society has already entered the Second Axis Ara [2] and the New Axis Era [3], and that the world had also entered the “ Warring States Era”. If we made a detailed analysis, there were at least three aspects that shown the similar features of the two ages.

2. The Overall Social Situation Was: Great Change, Great Adjustment and Great Development Periods

It was known that the Spring and Autumn periods were not only one of the most turbulent and divisive periods but also one of the great changes and great development periods in the whole Chinese history, for this period had ended the history of unification that since the Western Zhou Dynasty, “under the broad heavens, all were our kings; the unification of the land, all were the Kings ministers,”and the social situation of 500 years of vassal division, states disputes, great reforms and hegemony. It was a real period of change-leading development, for various vassals of different states began to carry out different reforms and explorations in many respects in order to adapt to social changes for their survival and development. Just as Wang Fuzhi, a famous scholar at the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties,had highly generalized of this social nature of the Warring States Period as “A Meeting of Great Changes of the Past and the Present”. Although today’s worlds were not as chaos as the Warring States, the overall development pattern were very similar: Not only the deep changes that had happened in power structure in the world, but also various countries were in the historical process from great changes to accelerated development. Just as a scholar had pointed out: “in the just past 30 years, the great changes had happened in the world far exceeded those of the previous 300 years.” [4] So it was great worth our attention that the general trend of great changes and developments in the two ears in toward “integration”. That was, although turbulent and changes were the main traits of The Times, the overall trend was toward integration. However, the outcome of the

development of the Warring States period in China was great unification, while Globalization had become irresistible trend in Contemporary international society. As Bill Clinton, who was former US President once said: “we share a common future on a planet that is getting smaller, a world without walls is the only sustainable world.”

3. The Diversified Development, Conflicts, Communication and Integration

It was true that the Warring States Periods were a very prosperous and glorious period in which various regional cultures compered for the developments in Chinese cultural history. On the one hand, in the great radical social changes, the destruction and extinction of the old system dominated by the aristocracy since the Western Zhou Dynasty brought about the “Collapse of Rites and Music”. The decline of Zhou Emperor had resulted in the relative independence of politics, economy and military of each vassal state, thus forming a cultural personality display and diversified development. On the other hand, the great social changes from “the high banks became valleys, deep valleys was tombs” became the dissolution of the aristocratic family system of “the surname of the three Queens was now a commoner”. Under such circumstances, the popularization of the aristocracy made the knowledge move down, while the rise of private schools increased the opportunity for some commoners and common people to receive education, which brought the improvement of the knowledge level of common people. The convergence of the two brought about the expansion of intellectual groups and the rapid improvement of social status, that is ,the rise of the so-called “shi”, which had formed the Warring States period ideological liberation, academic freedom, philosophical breakthrough, a hundred schools of thought contending, a large number of celebrities, cultural prosperity of the cultural wonders.All these had a profound impact on the culture of China and the world. The Jixia Academy in Linzi of the State of Qi (now Zibo, Shandong Province), which appeared in the fourth century to the second century BC, was the academic and cultural center where various scholars of different schools exchanged, argued, absorbed and developed with each other, reflecting the trend of academic exchanges and integration of the Warring States. In contemporary society, due to the acceleration of global exchanges brought by the wave of economic globalization, the technological revolution, especially the arrival of the Internet Era, has greatly narrowed the distance between different cultures and religions. Today is an era of unprecedented cultural exchanges, collisions and integration. In recent years, various dialogues in civilizations held multilaterally by the international academic community, they are the embodiment of such cultural exchanges, mutual discrimination and absorption. [5]

4. The Development of Humanistic Thoughts

The pursuit of human freedom, respect for human personality and emphasis on human development are the common characteristics of the two eras. Humanism is the core value of the fine traditional Chinese culture. There is a record of “The Spirit of man and all things” in the earliest document *Shang Shu · Tai Oath*. During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States period, the collapse of the old aristocracy brought opportunities for the development of humanistic thoughts. During the Spring and Autumn Period, the states fought for hegemony and competed for development, and man became the dominant factor. Qihuan, the first of the five hegemons, “Nine Combined Princes, Not With Chariots”, showed the value and respect for human life while dominating the achievements. Therefore, the book *Guanzi* first put forward

“human-oriented”. During the Warring States period, the trend of “honoring the virtuous corporal” prevailed, which showed that the desire for talents was also an important embodiment of humanistic thoughts. At that time, King Xuan of Qi saw a commoner Yan Chu. While the King sat on the hall, Yan Chu stopped waking. So King Xuan said, “Come before me!” But Yan Chu said, “Come unto me”. King Xuan of Qi said, “I am the king of a country in a noble position, but you are a common man in a lowly position. How can I bow down and beg you?” From this story, a fierce debate broke out over whether to be a “noble king” or a “noble scholar”. Yan Chu convinced the king of Qi by an example: “when Qin defeated Qi, he ordered those who dared to go to the ridge (tomb) of Liu Xiaji (a famous scholar) to cut wood, “death will not be forgiven”, and those who could get the head of the king of Qi, “Give thousands of Yi of gold”, it can be seen that “the head of the king was not like the ridge of the dead scholar”. In the end, King Xuan of Qi admitted his mistake and paid homage to his teacher. In Confucianism, Confucius had elevated humanity to the core of his ideology. Mencius, on the other hand, combined humanism with politics and raised the “people first” thought to an unprecedented height, proposing that “the people are the most valuable, the state is second, and the king is light.” In contemporary society, no matter how different the Eastern and Western cultural traditions and religious beliefs are, humanism is the mainstream of the zeitgeist. Taking humanism and people-centered thinking as the highest value pursuit and combining it with the rule of law, it has become the dominant thought of governing the country in general.

We make a brief comparison between the era of Confucius and Mencius and the current era, narrowing the distance between us and them. Although the time of Confucius and Mencius is more than two thousand years away from our today, due to the similarities in some social forms, they were not far away from today’s society. We can observe the educational practice of Confucius and Mencius at a distance of more than two thousand years. By replaying Confucius and Mencius to their social reality, observing and summarizing their educational practice, and representing a real Confucius and Mencius, we can more directly and truly learn the ideological significance and educational value of their educational practice in the contemporary era.

5. Contemporary Reflections on the Educational Practice of Confucius and Mencius

In today’s society, under the new situation of economic globalization, integration of science and technology and information networking, human development and social progress require us to first solve some practical and potential problems in future-oriented education. So, as the current generation, if we explore the practice of Confucius and Mencius education deeply, we can find that the rich educational practice activities of Confucius and Mencius in their whole lives are really an inexhaustible treasure house of thought and culture. Now the paper will only be about the following three aspects of a brief understanding:

5.1. The Innovative Spirit of “the World” Vision

Confucius and Mencius lived in the divided Spring and Autumn Periods and the Warring States Periods, located in a corner of today’s Shandong Province -- Zoulu State. From the end of the Spring and Autumn Periods to the Warring States periods, these two vassal states were small states with narrow land and weak strength.

Confucius and Mencius run education in the land of Zoulu, their common features were “taking the world as their own responsibility”, training to meet the needs of the world’s pillars.

First, they recruited the world's disciples. According to the statistics in Kuang Yaming’s *Commentary on Confucius*, there were 68 Confucius’ disciples whose name still known by us today, belonging to nine vassal states at that time. Mr. Li Qiqian, whose book *Studies on the Disciples of Confucius* was published, counted 104 of them, belonging to 11 states. It could be seen that the so-called “education without class” referred not only to people of poor origin, but also to countries and places of origin.

Second, the disciples should take the way of the world. Both Confucius and Mencius were engaged in educational practice, so another common feature was that they traveled around the world. Confucius taught all his life and paid attention to the political and social realities of the countries at that time, so study tours became one of his important educational practice activities. At the age of 35, he first went to the State of Qi and stayed in Qi for three years, mainly studying Qi culture. Thereafter, Confucius visited Wei, Chen, Cao, Song, Zheng, Cai, Kuang, Chu and other vassal states, which lasted for more than ten years. Mencius, on the other hand, “followed by dozens of chariots and hundreds of followers”, reached the states of Qi, Wei, Teng, Xue, Song, Lu and so on, which also lasted 20 years.

Third, they cultivated the talents of the whole country. *The Records of the Grand Historian* and *The Biography of Rulin* said: “After Confucius died, the seventy disciples scattered to the princes. The elder were teachers and ministers, while the younger were friends with priests and doctors.” It could be seen that his disciples spread all over the world and were mostly pillars of talents. And Mencius’ principle of recruiting disciples was more clearly defined as “Get the world’s outstanding talents and educate them”, and took this as one of “the gentleman’s three pleasures”. [6]

Before Confucius, the education system was mainly “learning in the government”, and education was monopolized by the aristocracy. There was no precedent for how to deal with folk education. In response to the social reality of “the collapse of rites and music” and the lack of discipline in the world, Confucius began to found private schools. With a set of effective educational principles, teaching methods, and management systems, Confucius founded the largest educational group in the history of Chinese education and created the “prominent school” with the greatest influence and the largest number of people. What needs to be explained here was that Confucius’ innovation reflected his profound observation of the development trend of The Times and his extraordinary innovative spirit for the development of national culture, and put this innovative spirit into educational practice. For example, Confucius taught his students from the traditional “six arts”, namely: rites, music, shooting, bending, writing and number; Then he took “literature, action, loyalty and faith” as the four major educational contents, that was, to carry out comprehensive quality education such as cultural knowledge, practical ability, loyalty and character, and honesty in dealing with people; And then the “Six Classics” will be personally compiled as teaching materials. This was undoubtedly a kind of innovation and exploration in the reform of teaching materials, which was closely related to the conflicts of various countries after the Spring and Autumn period and the unprecedented destruction of national culture. He compiled the “Six Classics”, the three generations of cultural classics were sorted out and preserved, and passed on to

students in the form of teaching materials, so that national cultural classics could be passed down and national cultural traditions could be continued. From the perspective of knowledge, he cultivated the students' national spirit with the essence of the three generations of culture. Later generations praised Confucius: "Without Confucius, there would be no Chinese culture. The culture thousands of years before Confucius has been passed down through Confucius. And the culture thousands of years after Confucius, thanks to Confucius." [7] This was to praise Confucius for his great contribution, but also to praise Confucius for his great innovative spirit.

In today's world, globalization has become an irresistible trend of development. To explore Confucius' educational practice and learn from his educational wisdom, it is especially necessary to absorb Confucius' vision to the whole world and his practical spirit of innovative education. To do this, we should have a vision and realm facing the world and the future of globalization, try to reform the closed and stylized education mode existing in modern education with an innovative spirit, and lead the direction of education with a global vision.

5.2. Based on Moral Education ,With Both Political Integrity and Ability

Confucius' establishment of private schools was the product of social change. In view of the social reality of "the collapse of rites and music" in the Spring and Autumn Periods, Confucius had two purposes in establishing education: one was to cultivate talents who could correct the world and transform the society; The second was to inherit the moral education, in order to realize his ideal of "restoring the rites". Therefore, his education was closely connected with the politics and morality of the time. He paid special attention to the moral education of "benevolence" and "rites". *The Analects of Confucius* was mostly a record of Confucius' conversations in teaching students, among which benevolence was mentioned most, 109 times; Followed by "Li", 75 times. The "benevolence" in Confucius' mouth was politicized morality, and the "Rites" in Confucius' mouth is moralized politics. Confucius taught his students in a harmonious combination of the two, so that most of his students had both virtue and ability. The greatness of Confucius' educational spirit also lied in his concept of educating people based on virtue, which had a strong demonstration and driving force in his educational practice. After reading "*Analects of Confucius*", the image of an indefatigable teacher made the reader long imprinted in the heart and thought-provoking. Later generations praised Confucius as "The teacher for all ages", which not only respected his moral spirit, but also admired his teacher's style. The thought of Confucius had been passed on and explained from generation to generation, and had an immeasurable impact on the cultivation of the ethic-based national spirit of the Chinese nation. Mencius inherited and carried forward the moral education spirit of Confucius, vigorously promoted the theory of benevolent government, and more closely combined politics, morality and education. After the Han Dynasty, Confucian thought was used to govern the country, so the moral cultivation and inheritance system was concreted into the national spirit inheritance system with benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and trust as the core. China had been known as the "a state of rites and righteousness", which was directly related to the inheritance of Confucius' moral education concept.

Under the new situation of economic globalization and rapid development of science and technology, the morality-based wisdom concept in Confucius and Mencius' educational practice and the Confucian-based educational thought of moral education are still valuable spiritual wealth for the development of contemporary

human society.

First, the ultimate social goal pursued by Confucius' moral education practice is to build a harmonious and orderly beautiful world. Confucius praised "the use of etiquette, harmony is valuable", "the way of the former king, is now beautiful", his ideal was that everyone had the virtue of gentleman, and "gentleman's moral style" could form the peace and tranquility of the world. Since the 20th century, after the bloodshed and suffering of the two World Wars, it had been the common pursuit of all mankind to build a harmonious world.

Second, Confucius' moral education practice was based on the education of "benevolence" and "courtesy" (Rites). Mencius further put forward the "the five cardinal relationships" teaching of father and son, king and minister, husband and wife, old and young, friends, which was the embodiment of "benevolence" and "rites" education. The core concept of moral education advocated by Confucius and Mencius was the education of broad love, which had universal significance and value in today's world. It was especially worth mentioning that the "Five Permanents" Confucian moral education system, "benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom and trust", formed with Confucius and Mencius' moral education thoughts as the core, had been the core values of Chinese society for more than two thousand years. Although the interpretation of its connotation had evolved continuously with the development of The Times, its spiritual core had eternal value beyond time and space, and would have the spiritual food in the back of globalization.

Third, the education of Confucius and Mencius emphasized both virtue and ability, faced the society, served the reality, and were highly practical. This also provided a model with guiding significance for contemporary education and personnel training. We must continue to strengthen the construction of the core value system with the promotion of traditional virtues and the development of ethics in the new era as the main body, make the moral education system accompanied by lifelong education, be virtuous people, build a virtuous country, and promote the construction of a harmonious and civilized world.

5.3. The Concept of People-oriented Educational Practice

The greatness of the education of Confucius and Mencius also lied in their vigorous exploration, promotion and practice of humanistic thought at that time. In their educational practice, the brilliance of humanistic thought shined everywhere, and their rich and colorful humanistic thoughts were the spiritual wealth that we should cherish doubly. The practice of Confucius' humanistic education was mainly reflected in the following aspects:

First, Confucius paid attention to fairness, and there was no class. Confucius put it this way: "If I cultivate my own teachings, I am not without instruction." (*The Analects of Confucius · Shu er*), the following quotations were from those who have not noted their sources *The Analects of Confucius*), that was, all adults could be my students. This concept of educational equality reflected Confucius' broad humanistic feelings that transcend The Times.

Second, Confucius taught students according to their aptitude and paid attention to personality. Confucius' students came from a wide range of sources and had complex composition. Confucius insisted on different people and guided them well. He proposed to teach them separately by "listening to their words and observing their actions", and "seeing their reasons, observing their reasons, and observing their

homes". In the Southern Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi summed up Confucius' method as "Confucius teaches people according to their own talents".

Third, Confucius respected for personality and equality between teachers and students. The relationship between Confucius and his students had shown the valuable spirit of equality, that is, teaching and learning, approachable, mutual respect and love. To Confucius, the teachers and students had become a model of respect for teachers and love for students. Confucius openly advocated "to be benevolent, not to give in to your teachers", that is, to call on students to do such important things as practicing benevolence and justice, and not to be humble to teachers. His love for his students and their respect for him reached the level of relatives. When he heard of the death of his student Yan Hui, he looked up to heaven and lamented, "Heaven has forsaken me! Heaven has forsaken me!" This reflected his close bond with his students. When his student Zi Gong heard someone denigrate Confucius, he admired him from the heart: "Zhong Ni, just like the sun and the moon, has nothing but more than nothing. Though a man wants to kill himself, why does he hurt the sun and the moon?"

The humanistic thought displayed by Confucius in his educational practice is a mirror of our contemporary people, and the teacher-student relationship he created could be regarded as a model for generations of educators. Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty gave the imperial plaque of Confucius Temple in Qufu "Teachers for Generations", which also showed the universal value of Confucius' educational practice beyond time and space.

The humanistic thought displayed by Confucius in educational practice was not only a mirror of our contemporary people (this contemporary people mean the whole human beings), but also a rich spiritual nourishment. We could achieve the modern transformation and value realization of Confucius' humanistic thought in education by learning from Confucius' spiritual concept and Confucius' educational practice experience. To transform, inherit and carry forward Confucius' humanistic thought, it's thought that there were three main points:

First, "benevolence loves others", Confucius's humanism. First of all, out of the heart of love, today's people, the first to learn the love of Confucius. Teachers and students were like father and son, like brothers, love deeply, close the cut, this was the general starting point.

Second, the thought of loyalty and forgiveness "do not do to others what you do not want to do to yourself" was the spiritual basis for respecting the personality of others. Only by taking Confucius thought as the foundation of our moral spirit today, could we truly practice the humanistic thought.

Third, "harmony without distinction" was one of the main parts of the gentleman's personality advocated by Confucius. In the contemporary close exchanges between different nationalities, religions and countries, only by realizing the gentleman's character, which Confucius admired, could there be humanism in the context of globalization. Only by cultivating the noble spirit of the gentleman with the thoughts of love, forgiveness and harmony could we become a kind person and a gentleman in the new era, which was the moral foundation that contemporary people should have.

The practical experience of Confucius' humanistic education runned through a series of his practice of teaching and learning with students. Confucius' educational practice directly provided us with the model of humanistic education practice today. In author's opinion, Confucius provided at least three paradigms on how to realize it

in words and deeds:

First, dialogue and communication occurred in response to encounter. An “Analects” recorded more dialogue between Confucius and students, or earnestly admonish, or listen to, clearly Confucius and students in depth of communication.

Second, paid attention to each other in daily life. The individualization of Confucius’ education, teaching students according to their aptitude, all stems from his attention to students’ daily life. He summed up Yan Hui: “A handful of rice, a gourdful of water to drink, living in a mean street, others would have found it unendurably depressing, but to Hui’s happiness it made no difference at all.” His meticulous observations and comments were not only respect and praise for his disciples, but also a way to educate students.

Third, tried to schedule specific practical activities. For example, the communication with the attendants of the four disciples, “each with his own ambitions”, was like a wonderful special performance, but also like an educational activity specially arranged by him, which was a representative activity in Confucius’ educational practice.

Through dialogues and exchanges, daily attention, and special discussions, Confucius had provided us with a wealth of practical experience in education, showing his rich humanistic thoughts and feelings.

6. Conclusions

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Chinese society underwent profound changes and adjustments. During this period, the cultural field presented a prosperous scene of diverse development. As the founder and a significant representative of Chinese Confucianism, Confucius and Mencius made significant contributions to the development of human civilization with their unique insights and innovative educational thoughts. Confucius established a set of effective educational principles and put them into educational practice. In response to the social reality of “the collapse of rites and music” and the lack of discipline in the world, Confucius began to found private schools. In their educational practice, Confucius and Mencius consistently adhered to an education concept centered on morality, emphasizing the cultivation of humanistic thoughts. The thoughts of these two philosophers have a profound impact that transcends time and borders, inspiring future generations to think about practice education. Therefore, in the current era, it is of significant importance to re-examine and draw upon the educational philosophies of Confucius and Mencius.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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