

## Mencius's theory of "original goodness" and its significance on goodness education in Vietnam nowadays<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Respecting and promoting the moral values, good culture of religions is an important task in school educational process in any country. Confucianism is one of the ideologies which has great influence on the Eastern cultural life and thoughts from past to present. Mentioning Confucianism, it is impossible not to refer to Mencius - one of the great philosophers and ideologists of China. His perception lies in the theory of *goodness*. In this article, the authors clarify the basic content of the theory of *original goodness* and its meaning in the moral education of the current young generation in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Mencius, Goodness, Ethics, Moral education.

### 1. About Mencius and the birth of theory of Goodness

#### 1.1. About Mencius

Mencius named Qiang Kha, Zi Du, was born in the reign of King Liet Xing of Zhou, originated in the Land of Zhou, belonged to Lu, now the city of Zhaucheng, Shandong Province, China. Mencius was an outstanding representative of Confucianism at the time of Warring States, the time when big thinkers flourished with movements such as Fascism, Confucianism, Maoism, etc.

During his youth, Mencius studied at the home of a well-known Confucian scholar named Tu Tu, who Mencius absorbed basic knowledge, understood moral then found his own place to practice. However, China was in that "warring state" (the country at war), the major countries was expanding power, struggling and dividing territories, so the people supposed that his ideas were unrealistic in the current situation. In this circumstance, he finally had to return home to establish schools "as a teacher, there were usually several hundred students following him" (Phan Boi Chau, 2010, p.368). He spent his free time with poem, "arranging the order in the *Testament, Sutra*, paraphrased the *Sui Ni* arts into Seven books *Mencius*" (*Shi Ma Biography*, 2000, p. 33). "The book narrates the conversations between Mencius and the vassals and with the followers" (Phung Huu Lan, 1998, p. 82). Thebook written by Mencius was later called

<sup>1</sup> This article is sponsored by the Key topics at the University Level Program, Hanoi University of Education, Code: SPHN17-3, VNCSP.

Mencius's book, is classified into Four Books as the basis for Confucian education in the history of China's feudal state and nation influenced by this culture. Mencius's book is like the books of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (427-347) in which the writer's thoughts expressed through dialogue with others.

Mencius was the developer of Confucius' thought with the idea *"People are the most important, social policy is more important, the king is lighter"*. He also proposed the theory of human beings was born of original nature which is good and kind. The ideology opposed to the theory of XunZi said "human beings are born of original nature which is evil". Mencius is the second Patriarch of Confucianism and is posthumously "holy" (behind Confucius only). Mencius who believed in truth for the whole life, had abundant wisdom, good presentation and analysis of philosophical reasoning. He consistently encouraged people to do good things. His single words always had the spirit of cheering and leading people.

### **1.2. The birth of Goodness Theory**

In Chinese history, in the Spring and Autumn period the Zhou dominated the country, but the vassals not subdue the power of the Zhou, so they always struggled to gain the power. This is the time to say, "Wang diminished," "The Hebrew word was emerging". Five big countries took over as hegemony (the peak of the copper of the Zhou Dynasty), the history is called the "Five Gods". In such a troubled society, the most important political issue was how to control the country. This is the reason for the emergence of the movements including *"zhūzǎobījīā"* (It was a period of great cultural and intellectual expansions in China that lasted from 770 to 222 BC)", or *"imperialists* which witnessed the flourishing of various schools of thought" with the birth of a series of ideas flowing as Confucianism, Taoist, Yin and Yang –five elements, etc.

*In the war time*, the seven powerful countries, namely Ta, Tan, Do, Tong, Wu, Qin, Viet conducted war on each other so called war time (the whole country had war). This was the most turbulent historical period in China. People everywhere have become immoral - that is the practical basis for the birth of Ruism, Moism, Legalism. In that sense, Confucianism took the leading position, decided the way of country management as well as governed the moral ideals of contemporary Chinese society (see: Le Cong Su, 2014, p. 284-287).

To deal with the situation, to reestablish the social order, following the ancestors of Confucius, Mencius highlighted the role of goodness, emphasizing the power of "Four Constant Virtues include *"Kindness (Ren), Righteousness (Yi), Decorum (Li), Wisdom (Zhi)"* through the specific measure is education of human heart and mental nursing, in which Kindness is the fundamental nucleus that regulates the content and expression of other elements. Mencius claims that human nature is originally good, and this is a person's gift of heaven, and is linked to heaven. Everyone has good morals and virtues, and if a virtuous person tries to cultivate himself, he can become like King Yao and King Shun.

Theo theory of original Goodness of Mencius is not the pure product of his thinking, which is the successor to the moral ideas of Confucius, namely the concept of Kindness, Decorum and Legitimacy theories. Confucius' conception of ethics has had a great

influence on Mencius' psychology and thought. In his book, he always mentioned the name of Confucius with a respect, admiration and treated Confucius as a sage. For Mencius, the Confucian is great moral example; his thought is the criterion for evaluating the ways of treating people. Acquiring the concept of morality from Confucius, Mencius attempted to supplement and perfect Confucianism, in which he emphasized goodness as a remedy for the indifference disease of contemporary Chinese society.

Mencius was born at the time of the "Hunderd Schools of Thought" movement in China at that time. At this time there were many different schools of thought, each school was giving their own views about the way of country management, education, especially there was an ethical debate. According to Mencius<sup>2</sup> (Gaozi Chapter 1), the ethical debate has many different theories.

The first theory, Gaozi supposed that the nature does not have the difference between honesty and dishonesty, the good and the bad. It means that the human nature is "neutral", not good or evil. "The human nature is like a flow of water. If we declare to the east that it will flow to the east, if we declare to the west that it will flow to the west, human nature is not good or evil, like water does not necessarily flow to the East or the West" (Mencius, 1995, p. 147).

The second theory is that "nature of human can become good, it can become evil". In other words, human nature can be good or not good. Human's goodness depends on the social polity in which the head of that polity plays an important role, therefore, if King Wen of Zhou, King Wu of Zhou are the leaders of the country, the people of this country all have the love of honesty or goodness; if U Wang, Le Wang govern the country, the people become evil.

The third theory is that people are honest and good. It means that human beings practice virtue according to the motto "We are all different, which is great because we are all unique".

When refuting the views above, Mencius supposed that human's quality is good. Goodness is natural (inherent nature) in every human being. He wrote: "To speak of the nature of man, it can be said that goodness is the nature of honesty that we talk about. For someone becoming evil, it is not his/her nature. I agree with everyone that agreement, shame, respect or reverence all have in each human. Compassion is Kindness, Shame is Righteousness, Respect is Decorum and Reverence is Wisdom. Kindness, Righteousness, Decorum, Wisdom are not something that the outside world gives us, but we ourselves have it, just not thinking about it. Thus, to learn is to get them, to give up is to lose them" (Mencius, pp. 525-523; 2011).

Mencius does not inherit stereotypically from Confucius' viewpoint, but rather develops in the direction of integrating the moral conception of other schools in line with the moral needs of contemporary Chinese society. For him, the Four Constant Virtues include "Kindness, Righteousness, Decorum and Wisdom are the foundation of social morality, the motto of the human interaction". To form and develop "four virtues", it is important to cultivate the mind, practice and train the body healthy.

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<sup>2</sup> It is quoted from The Book of Mencius, printed in Tu Thu (Quoc Trung translation), Culture and Information Publishing House, 2011.

## 2. Basic content of Goodness Theory of Mencius

Mencius's theory of goodness comes from the general conception of Confucianism: "Human is innately good. It is almost the same but due to different customs, this nature may change. Education is the focus." Such a view expresses his belief in the kindness of everyone, regardless of who they are. Such unconscious trust has become a motive force for human moral behavior based on love and mutual trust, it is able to rely on each other in all circumstances.

Mencius said that "natural character" is inherited by God - There is mind, there is kindness. Mind and kindness are counted as one. Kindness is the essence, is the basic element in human beings, things happening well or bad depends on the mind. Understanding the mind is the understanding of the characters. Therefore, the cultivation of the mind is the process of nursing the characters. Because if you do not cultivate the mind, the character will gradually fade, your lifestyle becomes distorted. Mencius is consistent in asserting that the mind in everyone is the same. However, the manifestation of the outward appearance of the mind is different, causing each person to have a different personality, so there are wise people, idiots, great men, and cowards. Mind is the moral foundation, is the motto of the opponent so it should constantly be trained, preserved so it will be good. Kindness or mind to be preserved to be kept, otherwise it will be damaged. It is like the human nature which must constantly be trained and preserved. The basic role of keeping goodness is about the responsibility of both themselves and the responsibility of the social community.

In Human's mind is an important and decisive factor to personality. Therefore, if a person has a mind, then the human is no longer oscillating, leaning against the waves of life, people can then live according to the principle of "Wealth cannot be tempted, Poverty cannot be changed, Power cannot be interfered with".

So, Mind is the foundation of human morality, which is the basis and nucleus of the personality of everyone. Therefore, spiritual cultivation is a prerequisite for nurturing mind. Nurturing mind is often and persistently like holding the trees in the forest, if all the trees are cut, then the forest will disappear and then disappear forever.

In order to preserve goodness, to keep the clear mind, to preserve and nurture the mind: Firstly, Mencius emphasized the role of education. According to Mencius, people have mind, but if they are not trained, taught and learned, then the mind will gradually disappear, like the trail has on the mountain, but that for long time no people go through and then the weeds will grow out, it will not a trail anymore. In this regard, Mencius wrote: "The small road on the side of the mountain for a short period of time nobody often passes through the road, then the grass will cover" (Mencius, p. 581; 2011). This is a symbolic example of the cultivation of mind and body as a regular and indispensable activity, otherwise the mind is gradually "overshadowed", covered by life circumstances, pale, "making the nature irretrievable.

Second, Mencius emphasized role of physical health. According to the Mencius, in each person with the mind, the nature is endowed with the "air". The air circulates throughout the universe, condensing into forms new things and people. Thanks to the air, everything and human beings grow. Mind is the soul, while the air is the body of human. Human beings need to keep the air so they can survive, grow and

develop. Nursing the air is the natural way to make temperament, harmony with each other, mental and physical force on each other. When mental and physical health is harmony, human is healthy, mind is clear, clever, acting right with morality.

Third, Mencius emphasized the role of Four Constant Virtues include "Kindness (Ren), Righteousness (Yi), Decorum (Li), Wisdom (Zhi) (also called the Four Clues of Human morality. The Four clues of human virtue, the four clues of goodness, the nature of human which is born as seeds in the seed, like the limbs of the body. Mencius expanded the concept of Kindness (Ren), Righteousness (Yi), Decorum (Li), Wisdom (Zhi), deepened and enriched their underpinning content. He said that the good man must always take the "Fourth" as a moral basis and the motto of the human's behaviors. However, due to the changing of social context, he did not speak about these categories in a general, abstract way such as Confucius, which concretized them. For him, "speaking of the nature of man, it can be said to be goodness, this is the nature of honesty that we mentioned above. For someone becoming evil, it is not its nature. I agree with everyone that agreement, shame, respect or reverence all have in each human. Compassion is Kindness, Shame is Righteousness, Respect is Decorum and Reverence is Wisdom. Kindness, Righteousness, Decorum, Wisdom are not something that the outside world gives us, but we ourselves have it, just not thinking about it. Thus, to learn is to get them, to give up is to lose them "(Mencius, pp. 525-523; 2011).

If Confucius emphasized kindness as the love of human beings (Men of Love), Mencius affirmed that kindness is empathy, sharing love with fellow human beings and having sense of responsibility. This is the foundation of ethics and guideline of human's interations, kindness "is the safest place of man" (Mencius, p.367; 2011). Because, it is in every human being "Kindness occupies an important position, the quietest place of man. If there is no kindness, then what is called wisdom? "(Mencius, p.426; 2011).

For the monarch, the kindness is the basic nucleus for building the country management called "Kindness method" or "Ethics method" that Confucian has set before. Up to the date Mencius's political direction has still been significant. From the review of the history of the Chinese history movement, Mencius has an objective basis to assert that, "the Three Periods of Xia, Shang and Zhou are all good thanks to human's mind; They lose the country due to the lack of human's mind or kindness. The reasons of prosperity, survive or death depended on the kindness. If the King does not have the kindness, he cannot keep the country; vassals do not have the heart, nor can hold the country; If the academic people do not have the heart, they can not keep the self; the friars and the common people cannot protect themselves. If fear of death, but it's not fun to do the good things, this is like the fear of getting drunk but still want to drink a lot "(Mencius, p.360; 2011). Thus, the cause is compassion, sympathy, sharing, mutual suffering between people, is the foundation of social morality.

However, kindness (Ren) is not a singularity, but a manifestation of attachment to meaning, which becomes a category with a deeper meaning than "humanity." According to Mencius, "it is the best way of man" (Mencius, *ibid.*, p. 367; 2011). He means self-determination of purpose in life, that is, great ideals, aspirations, noble, living wholeheartedly or devotedly to the work assigned and the social community.

It means an unconditional moral imperative - like the notion of the "categorical imperative" of the German classical philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). According to Kant, the absolute command comes from the call of human conscience, which is latent in the heart, in the brain, in the universal - inevitably.

In Mencius's viewpoint, the Righteousness (Yi) is also the norm for evaluating a behavior as an act of moral conduct, that is, the act must be unconditional (non-profit, non-benefit). According to Confucianism, "Righteousness (Yi)" is the basis of "Frowess (Fen)", so the new sentence: "No Righteousness, No Frowee" - people having chance to help others but refuse is not courageous.

In Mencius' thought, kindness and righteousness are connected, which means that the human heart is always shameless and, of course, shameless. He wrote "Humans are heartless not to hurt others. The King is not heartless to harm others there is humanitarian politics mechanism, so the rule of the galaxy is as easy as turning things in hand. To say that a human is not heartless to harm others is based on the fact that if a human suddenly sees a child falling into a well, there is a pity, anxiety. It does not mean that they have a desire to confide to the parents of the child, not wanting to gain fame in friends or neighbors, are not afraid of the cries of the child's fear of doing so. From there it can be seen, he has no mercy, not human; The shameless person is not human" (Mencius, *ibid.*, Pp. 424-425; 2011).

If mercy (Ren) and shame (Yi) are the moral foundation of every human being, the Decorum (Li) in Mencius' conception is a concrete manifestation or representation of humanity. That means that the person who is decorum is a person who loves people and knows how embarrassment is. "Wisdom" is the understanding of Kindness, Righteousness, Decorum. Human beings have the knowledge of Kindness, Righteousness to act accordingly, that is, to have personality - mind and behavior according to the social rules. For those who do not know about these things, they act only according to the habit, according to their instinct, such people, despite moral attainments, are only in the normal range and would be hard to become a noble person. The four factors in the "Four Virtues" exist in the dialectical relationship, complementing and supporting each other to form a whole human personality or morality. However, according to Mencius, the foundation of "Fourths" can be expressed in family relationships. "The truth of the Kindness (Ren) is the worship of the parents. The true meaning of Righteousness (Yi) is honoring brothers. The real thing of Wisdom is knowing which is good or bad. The authenticity of the Decorum (Li) is to regulate and embellish those two things" (Mencius, *ibid.*, p. 469; 2011).

Why Mencius highly appreciated the "Fourth"? According to him, "The man who has no Kindness (Ren), Righteousness (Yi), Decorum (Li), Wisdom (Zhi) is only servant for others. When I'm embarrassed, I should practice Kindness. The people who practice Kindness is like shooting arrows, if it does not hit, do not blame the doer, should only blame myself" (Mencius, *Ibid.*, tr.426; 2011).

In summary, according to Mencius' logic, when human beings have mind, the air is full, stable, meeting four virtues of Kindness (Ren), Righteousness (Yi), Decorum (Li), Wisdom (Zhi), then he will not be ashamed of heaven, bent down not shy with people, live peacefully, cavalier in heaven and earth, natural in the human's interaction.

To educate human kindness, good man, Mencius paid attention to the following

methods:

First, is education by visual aids, tools and using actual experiment, in all conditions do not lower the required criteria.

Second, learn and follow the good people, good deeds - it is the most effective method to learn kindness, goodness.

Thirdly, make continuous efforts of self and devotion to work - there is also an educational method of kindness, goodness in each person.

In summary, when discussing the character of human beings, if Confucius highly appreciated the Kindness (Ren), Mencius promoted the Goodness (Xin). While Confucius promoted the Five Virtues (including Kindness (Ren), Righteousness (Yi), Decorum (Li), Wisdom (Zhi), Trust (Xin), Mencius appreciated the Four Virtues. According to Mencius, mind is the core, the root of human nature. He wrote: "Kindness (Ren), Righteousness (Yi), Decorum (Li), are based on the Mind. According to him, every thought and action of man comes from Xin. Thus, cultivating one's moral qualities is primarily to preserve one's own mind. The one who keeps the mind is the one who has the conscience. Conscience knows the meaning of humanity, understanding the right or the wrong. If you lose your conscience, people will become inferior, mean, poor. According to Mencius, human beings at birth are inherently good, like the proverbial phrase "Human is innately good. It is almost the same but due to different customs, this nature may change. Education is the focus". Goodness in human beings at birth is the universal law of nature, like the rule of "low water" (water always flows down). The concept of goodness in Mencius philosophy consists of virtues: Kindness (Ren), Righteousness (Yi), Decorum (Li), Wisdom (Zhi), Filialness (Qian), Loyal (Zhong), Respect (Zun). Those virtues are the foundation of human virtue.

Phan Boi Chau in "Confucianism" has a comparative perspective, according to him, the role of Confucius in Eastern philosophy is like that of Socrates in Western philosophy, while Mencius's role can be compared to Plato.

The virtues of Confucianism in general and Mencius's have not only influenced during his time but also time to the present day. With the motto "First is to learn manners, then to learn the academics", the modern education cannot be separated from the traditional education motto. We must inherit views and connect with tradition, creating a transition from the history. Mencius's theory of goodness to this day still has a certain value for us in evoking and educating humanity. Because "goodness" as the inherent nature of man, may be forgotten, buried or latent, so it is necessary to wake up, to return to human's values.

3. Meaning of goodness theory of Mencius with the moral education for the young generation of Vietnam today

At present, the process of globalization, international integration is taking place strongly, creating many opportunities as well as challenges for the development of each country. Globalization has contributed positively to economic growth and the ability of underdeveloped countries to escape poverty. The human needs of materials are increasingly being satisfied. However, before the whirlwind of globalization, exchanges and integration also have negative impacts on the development of each country, affecting the traditional cultures, values and ethics of Vietnamese in general

and the young generation. With that, Vietnam in transition economies from focusing mechanism, to a market driven economy, under the impact of two aspects of the market economy is changing many ethical norms and behaviors of individuals, especially the young generation, many expressions of moral degradation are happening in the family, school and society. Many students who are irresponsible, dissipated do not care about their own responsibilities towards his family and society, living without dreams and ambitions. Pragmatic lifestyle, physical Joneses, following the lure of money, trample morality, turned against the traditional moral values have reigned in many people. Particularly, in recent years the state of school violence is on the rise and has set at alarm bells for the degradation of ethics among the youth. Pragmatism is washed and began to show quite clearly in love, friendship, etc.

Facing the current situation, each of us need to realize that we need to have the proper orientation to educate the younger generation to know themselves to dominate the noble values, the essence of kindness and of the country; helping the younger generation gradually mastering wealth of knowledge, culture and ethics of humanity. Especially, we need to educate, orient to the children, t nurse their mind and kindness and to avoid the bad things around. To do that, it is essential to look for the theory of the goodness nature of Mencius, there are some tips as follows:

According to the goodness theory of Mencius, if rejected restrictions on historical conditions and markers of classes, then today it is still great value in moral education for the younger generation say overall, the younger generation in Vietnam In the change of life, the theory of goodness is to educate people to know about cultivation of properties, fostering compassion to win the lusts and tame circumstances, overcome the temptations of materials to live in harmony, more meaningful life. The meaning of Mencius of goodness theory is expressed in the following several aspects:

*First*, according to Mencius, in order to form a right personality, it is necessary to shape right from childhood, until maturity, remodeling malleable personality that is "shaped "anywhere, anytime, from families, schools to the social environment. This is a regular employment, self-discipline and life to each individual self-improvement, to meet the needs of society.

*Second*, human nature is good, people do evil is nothing but character education due to circumstances induce and impact, this is not the fault of their talent nature and human nature. Therefore, family, school, society needs the close cooperation, the strengths of each institution in moral education for the younger generation, to help individuals integrate into life with confidence and mature.

*Third*, because human nature is good and can become good, so educating younger generations must always be proactive before every situation, absorbing the positive side of life and limiting adverse impacts, avoid being greedy of materials. If you made a mistake, it should have to get right, and seek to correct because human all can become good.

President Ho Chi Minh said: "Working is a good person. Doing evil is evil and Diligent (Industrious), economical (save), clean (integrity), which are goodness. Lazy, luxury, greed people are evil" (Ho Chi Minh City, 1993, p.513). So, there is a need of education for the younger generation of bravery and determination of good or bad things, acting properly, avoiding money, personal interests, actively doing good,

preventing bad actions.

*Fourth*, according to Mencius, people want to improve the essential education to push the conscience, "cultivating the positive mind", diligent in learning to cultivate morality. People should always correct themselves, keeping his mind for yourself, shameless about wrongdoing, shameless of the ugliness because we need to be model for for the younger generation. If we are not good, we can not help the others.

*Fifth*, to distinguish the objects of education are different, depending on ability, a knack of going education that lays out methods and different content. This is a reasonable idea, correctness of Mencius so far is still meaningful.

*Sixth*, in the relationship of man with himself, each individual of young generation must be mentally continuous learning, to cultivate, train personal morality, to know looking at the trend of the times, find the general logic of the movement and development on a scientific basis to choose the values and standards consistent with so we can choose the right way to spark good in every person and living good, avoid evil.

### Conclusions

Mencius was born in an era of much confusion, disturbance, and much volatility for a long time. It was the disintegration of the regime of slavery and began to enter a period of feudal society with fierce competition forces to dispose between vassal states. Economic conditions - political, social of China at that time made the outcome of the "Hundred of Thoughts" leading to the proliferation of philosophical thought in ancient China, which influenced strongly to the intelligence, spirit of hospitality, loving human of Mencius. He has received and built up his philosophical doctrine that prominent theory of goodness nature. The theory of good nature of Mencius not just stop at the foundation of the policies of countries on the definition of "Kindness focus", the struggle against the views of thought in opposition at the time, which to this day is still great value in education of ethics values for people.

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