

Forgotten Thinkers: Mencius

Confucius 551 – 479 BC

Mencius 372 – 289 BC

The Master said, "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. "If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good." (Analects Book 2)

The Master said, "When we see men of worth, we should think of equaling them; when we see men of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves. (Analects Book 3)

The Cardinal Virtues of Mencius

Ren Benevolence: Is the sense of compassion for others and acts appropriate to these feelings.

Yi Righteousness: a sense of repugnance or disdain for acting dishonorable or being demeaned or treated with contempt.

Zhi Wisdom: the capacity to discern the nature of affairs and to act in keeping with the other virtues.

Li Propriety: To show respect and honor all rituals, not just in empty action, but in thought and feeling.

Man has an innate sense of all four cardinal virtues that can and should be cultivated:

'When I say that all men have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others, my meaning may be illustrated thus:-- even now-a-days, if men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favour of the child's parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing. From this case we may perceive that the feeling of commiseration is essential to man, that the feeling of shame and dislike is essential to man, that the feeling of modesty and complaisance is essential to man, and that the feeling of approving and disapproving is essential to man. The feeling of commiseration is the principle of benevolence. The feeling of shame and dislike is the principle of righteousness. The feeling of modesty and complaisance is the principle of propriety. The feeling of approving and disapproving is the principle of knowledge. (Works of Mencius: Book 2 Chapter 6)

Mencius went to see king Hui of Liang. The king said, 'Venerable sir, since you have not counted it far to come here, a distance of a thousand li, may I presume that you are provided with counsels to profit my kingdom? Mencius replied, 'Why must your Majesty use that word "profit?" What I am provided with, are counsels to benevolence and righteousness, and these are my only topics. 'If your Majesty say, "What is to be done to profit my kingdom?" the great officers will say, "What is to be done to profit our families?" and the inferior officers and the common people will say, "What is to

be done to profit our persons?" Superiors and inferiors will try to snatch this profit the one from the other, and the kingdom will be endangered. In the kingdom of ten thousand chariots, the murderer of his sovereign shall be the chief of a family of a thousand chariots. In the kingdom of a thousand chariots, the murderer of his prince shall be the chief of a family of a hundred chariots. To have a thousand in ten thousand, and a hundred in a thousand, cannot be said not to be a large allotment, but if righteousness be put last, and profit be put first, they will not be satisfied without snatching all. 'There never has been a benevolent man who neglected his parents. There never has been a righteous man who made his sovereign an after consideration. 'Let your Majesty also say, "Benevolence and righteousness, and let these be your only themes." Why must you use that word -- "profit?" (Opening of the Works of Mencius)

Han Dynasty 206 BC – 220 AD Informal examinations for some officials based on the Confucian classics began to be implemented.

Tang 618-907 – Increased the complexity of the exams, expanded who could take the exams and added more subjects. The classics played a central role.

Song Dynasty 960-1279 – Heavy reliance on neo-Confucianism and a greatly expanded pool of students who could, in theory, take the imperial exam.

Some form of the examinations system continued until 1905. (Exists in a different form today as college entrance exams – Gaokao)

Communist Poster Opposing Confucianism

When Confucius was about thirty years old, he began a private school, collecting disciples far and wide. He strictly regulated the social class restrictions of who could enroll, extorting tuitions from all his students. At that time, a person of slave ancestry who lacked personal freedoms had no right to receive an education; the children of the aristocracy and of the officialdom came to study one after another. Confucius made use of oral instruction, gathering disciples and forming factions, training faithful lackeys who would restore the slavery system.

Amidst this great social revolution, the government of the slaveholding class was represented by Confucius. In 551 B.C.E. in the state of Lu, Confucius was born into a declining slaveholding family. He was second eldest among his siblings [and hence the name "Old Number Two"]. Confucius constantly bore in mind the fact that he himself was of a later generation of the slaveholding aristocracy. When he was young, he loved to set up little bowls and dishes as sacrificial vessels and imitate the kowtowing rituals to his aristocratic ancestry.

Currently, the Communist party is backing an aggressive revival of Confucius and the Chinese Classics.