

# On Mencius' Thoughts of Friendship

Cui Yaxin; Yu Na\*

*Jilin Foreign Studies University, Changchun, Jilin 130117  
156519842@qq.com, 15330796303@163.com*

## ABSTRACT

As one of the most important representatives of Chinese Confucian Thoughts, Mencius's thoughts of friendship not only enriched its connotation, but also gave deep social meanings to the activity of making friends. Faced with increasingly frequent social mobility since the end of the Spring and Autumn period, Mencius came up with thoughts of friendship, including the concept of "making friends with Tao", the premise of "without three presumptions", the criterion that "friendship with his virtue", the principle that "trustworthiness in friendship" and the way of "friendship with kindness" and "urging one to kindness". It not only provided guidance for people's friendship at the time, but also laid the foundation for the basic spirit of Chinese traditional friendship. The interpretation and thinking of Mencius's thoughts of friendship is not only conducive to spreading and inheriting the Confucian friendship culture, but also conducive to people's understanding of the nature of friendship, promoting the formation of harmonious and friendly interpersonal relationships between people, and maintaining the harmony and stability of the entire society.

**Keywords:** *Mencius, friends, thoughts of friendship*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mencius, also named Ke and Ziyu, is a famous philosopher, thinker, politician, educator, and one of the important representatives of Confucianism during the Warring States Period in ancient China, second only to Confucius. The book "Mencius" by Mencius is a concentrated expression of his thoughts. The whole book compiles the dialogues between Mencius and his disciples and some monarchs in the form of question and answer, reflecting Mencius's in-depth research and thinking on human nature, justice and profit, politics, etc. It is a landmark classic in the history of Confucianism. Over the centuries, Mencius' thoughts have had a profound impact on traditional Chinese politics, economy, education, philosophy and other fields. In terms of social interaction, the "five ethics" norms proposed by Mencius in the book, namely, the five interpersonal relationships between the emperors and the ministers, fathers and sons, brothers, couples, and friends, provide the basic principles for people's social interaction. Since the Western Zhou Dynasty, interpersonal relations have always been part of a social structure that combines politics and patriarchal ethics, and "friendship" is an identity and rule that rely on patriarchal blood relations. During this period, "friend" refers to both the people of the same race and the friendly and harmonious relationship between people of the race. On the basis of inheriting the thoughts of friendship in Western Zhou Dynasty, Mencius expanded the emotional dimension of the friendship between friends and promoted the social responsibility of the friendship, which is of great significance to the realization of the individual's own and social values.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF "MAKING FRIENDS WITH TAO"

Mencius emphasized: "Make friends with Tao, treat people with courtesy." That is to say, people must follow certain rules when making friends, and they must also pay attention to etiquette. "In pre-Qin Confucianism, Tao is the incarnation and collection of all goodness, and it is also the ultimate destination and highest value standard of all ideological activities."<sup>[1]</sup> "Make friends with Tao" refers that any kind of communication between friends should not be separated from the practice of good and the highest standards. This means that the contacts between people in Mencius's vision are not only interpersonal activities based on accidental events and free will, but also contain the progress of individual achievements and the inherent requirements for social moral rules. Mencius is keenly aware that friends, as a social role, also bear a set of rights and obligations consistent with their social status and identity in relationship with friends. Therefore, the "Tao" between friends needs to nurture the individual's moral conscience and self-discipline. In making friends, "Tao" originates emotionally from the innate "compassion" of human beings, and is embodied in "without three presumptions", "friendship with his virtue", "trustworthiness in friendship" and "friendship with kindness" and "urging one to kindness". Under the concept of "making friends with Tao", it embodies the unity of justice and emotion. It can be seen that "making friends with Tao" is the core of Mencius's ideological system of making friends.

### **3. THE PREMISE OF “WITHOUT THREE PRESUMPTIONS”**

Wan Zhang, one of Mencius’s best disciples, once asked him, “How to make friends?” The first sentence Mencius answered is that “without the presumption on the ground of one’s superior age, or position, or the power of his relatives.” That is, when making friends, one should not rely on one’s superior age, position, or the power of his relatives, which is the premise of friendship. At the late Warring States period, countries and people were tumultuous with each other, and friendships were alienated under the constraints of social relations. In this context, Mencius’s proposal of making friends, “without the presumption on the ground of one’s superior age, or position, or the power of his relatives”, contains a profound idea of equality, emphasizing the equality and purity of friendships and the independence of the personalities of both parties, which has important practical value and far-reaching significance. The concept of “without three presumptions” of making friends, on the surface, is a requirement of oneself when making friends. Also, it shows from the side that when choosing a friend, it is not based on whether the other party is “of superior age”, “of higher position” or “of greater power”, which cannot be used as a criterion for choosing friends. In that case, what are the criteria for selecting friends? This paved the way for Mencius to propose the standard of selecting friends of “friendship with his virtue”.

### **4. THE CRITERION OF “FRIENDSHIP WITH HIS VIRTUE”**

In Mencius's view, when choosing a friend, one should focus on his character rather than his external conditions. After proposing the premise of making friends “without three presumptions”, Mencius immediately proposed that the criterion for selecting friends should be “virtue.” Mencius continued to answer Wan Zhang, saying: “Friendship with a man is friendship with his virtue, and does not admit of assumptions of superiority.” He directly gave the criteria for choosing a friend is “friendship with his virtue” and highlighted “not admit of assumptions of superior.” Subsequently, he cited the example of the friendship with virtue between Meng Xianzi, a minister, and Fei Huigong, the king of a small country. They are in a position of wealth and eminence, admired and served by many people, but they do not consider the same eminent people as friends, nor are the people who serve them and know their likes and dislikes, but those with noble virtue. In the Western Zhou Dynasty, although Zhou Gong the monarch put forward the concept of “Government by Virtue”, this kind of moral requirement was only imposed on the ruler, and Mencius expanded the object of “virtue” from the ruler to the scholars and expanded the crowd of friendship. In addition, Mencius's “friendship with his virtue” criterion for selecting friends is in the same line with his thoughts of “Benevolence and Justice”. Mencius proposed the moral cultivation path of “dwelling in

benevolence and righteousness”, which is reflected in the aspect of choosing friends, and it is bound to emphasize the need to make friends with virtuous people to assist one's virtue.

### **5. THE PRINCIPAL OF “TRUSTWORTHINESS IN FRIENDSHIP”**

Mencius thought of “trustworthiness in friendship” as the principle in making friends. In his mind, the trust between friends is of high social value in the general interpersonal trust. In Warring States Period, when society was in turmoil and clans were disintegrating, the traditional inter-generational relationship, ethnic relationship, neighbor relationship and other interpersonal relationships based on blood and clan among people have gradually lost the effectiveness of cohesive trust. It is increasingly difficult for individuals to achieve greater social influence in clan-centered interpersonal communication activities. Faced with this situation, Mencius creatively proposed to establish the non-blood relationship among friends as one of the five main social relationships that individuals must experience in social life, giving more profound human values to the communication between friends. People's social relations have only begun to break through the geographical restrictions of villages and towns and expand to non-blood-related interpersonal communication. In the broader field of making friends, Mencius established “trustworthiness in friendship” as the principle of making friends. “Trust worthiness” is the state of keeping promises and sincere feelings among the subjects of interpersonal communication. “The practice of 'trustworthiness' brings about an emotional response. Once the “trustworthiness between friends” is formed, there will be intimate emotions between friends, making the relationship unbreakable.”<sup>[2]</sup>. In making friends, “trustworthiness” spontaneously arises from the understanding and appreciation of like-minded people, and it has a profound impact on stable and lasting friendships. “Trustworthiness in friendship” can not only highlight the moral spirit in friendships, but also help to reach a consensus of trust in non-blood-related social society, and promote the public goal of social integrity.

### **6. THE WAY OF “FRIENDSHIP WITH KINDNESS” AND “URGING ONE TO KINDNESS”**

Mencius believes that friends should learn from each other and encourage each other to achieve the best character. In the pre-Qin Confucianism, friends have the function of “cultivating kindheartedness”. On the basis of this function, Mencius put forward the requirements of “friendship with kindness” and “urging one to kindness” for the communication between friends. A good man means a virtuous man. Mencius believes that the foundation for the formation and maintenance of friendship stems from the individual's appreciation and yearning for noble character.

Therefore, the premise of “friendship with kindness” is that individuals who are also pursuing the perfection of their own character will be keen to make friends with people of high morality. They will have the same purpose and interests, and then they will have the same emotional resonance. But it is undeniable that there are often certain differences between the subjects of communication. Therefore, Mencius also proposed the way of “urging one to kindness”. Mencius said: “Urging one to kindness is the way of friends.” It means that urging one to kindness is the way for friends to get along. “Urging one to kindness” can supplement individual cognition, helping them improve their moral cultivation, and then achieving the purpose of “cultivating kindheartedness”. In an ideal situation, individuals can finally realize the sublimation of personal value to social value by “friending the good people of the world”.

## **7. THE CONTEMPORARY VALUE OF MENCIUS’S THOUGHTS OF FRIENDSHIP**

In ancient times, Mencius's thoughts of friendship had a profound influence on future generations. Beginning in the Han Dynasty, “friends of the same path” has become the basic concept of friendship in the Han Dynasty. Liu Tao, a Censor in East Han Dynasty, once said: “Those who can be friends must be of the same interest.” It can be seen that Mencius's “making friends with Tao” has gradually become the consensus of scholars. Since the Tang Dynasty, those in power have elevated integrity to the level of the foundation of governing the country, with special emphasis that “Integrity is the foundation of the country, and the return of the people.”<sup>[3]</sup> Since then, part of Mencius’s thoughts of friendship has gradually become one of the important guiding ideologies for the formulation of ancient Chinese political systems. It was in the West a century later that Plato made his first philosophical discussion of friendship in his book “Lysis”.<sup>[4]</sup> However, under the impact of modern civilization, the communicative ethics constructed by ancient eastern and western philosophers inevitably received a huge impact. Especially in today's increasingly globalized and diversified interpersonal communication, utilitarian interpersonal activities have alienated the essence of friendship, subverted its criterion, blurred its principles, and confused the ways of making friends. People's blind worship of scientific and technological rationality and prejudice and misunderstanding of interpersonal relations have caused many people to hold negative views and resist the current interpersonal relations in China. Under such a background, Mencius’s moral requirements for friendship, such as “making friends with Tao”, “without three presumptions”, “friendship with his virtue”, “trustworthiness in friendship” and “urging one to kindness”, directly point to the essence and core of friendship. His thoughts of friendship further demonstrate its enduring charm. Therefore, the interpretation and thinking of Mencius’s thoughts of friendship is not only

conducive to promoting and inheriting the Confucian friendship culture, but also conducive to people's understanding of the essence of making friends, promoting the formation of harmonious and friendly interpersonal relationships between people, and maintaining the harmony and stability of the entire society.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Since the Zhou Dynasty, patriarchal consciousness began to pervade every level of social relations. Mencius aims to adjust and regulate the relationship between people. By constructing an ethical and moral system, he has given far-reaching value to the activities of friendship. In Mencius’s thoughts of friendship, when making friends, you must always adhere to the idea of “making friends with Tao”. Before making friends, you must not make friends with your advantages of “superior age”, “higher position” and “power of relatives” so as to achieve the “without three presumptions”. When choosing friends, you should use “friendship with his virtue” as the criterion. When interacting with friends, you should use “trustworthiness in friendship” as the principle. When you get along with friends, you must be “kind” and “urging one to kindness”, counseling and guiding your friends. The interpretation and thinking of Mencius’s thoughts of friendship has important practical value and far-reaching significance.

## **AUTHOR INTRODUCTION**

Cui Yaxin (1999—): female, born in Baicheng, Jilin Province, 2018 undergraduate, College of English, Jilin Foreign Studies University.

Yu Na (1982—), corresponding author, female, born in Yanshou, Heilongjiang Province, master's degree, whose main research interests are ideological and political education, public governance and public policy, lecturer of College of Marxism in Jilin Foreign Studies University.

## **FUND PROJECTS**

This paper is the 2020 higher education scientific research project of Jilin Provincial Association of Higher Education, "Confucian Friendship Philosophy on The Enlightenment of Contemporary College Students" (project number: JGJX2020D216), Jilin Provincial Association of Higher Education 2020 Higher Education Research project "Chinese Traditional Culture Into the University Teaching Research and Practice" (project number: JGJX2020D230) stage results.

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