

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Research on Mencius' Thoughts on Sports

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Abstract

Mencius's sports thoughts inherited from Confucius. He proposed to cultivate the "vast, flowing qi" and emphasized the importance of participation and enjoyment; he also emphasized the sports cognition that "the humane man has no enemy."

Keywords: Mencius, Sports Thoughts, the Humane Man has no Enemy, Confucianism.

1. Introduction

Mencius inherited the thoughts of Confucius, but the era in which he lived was significantly different from that of Confucius. During Mencius' times, society was even more turbulent. The writings, classics, and records left by Mencius are mainly concentrated in the book *Mencius*. Mencius's main thought is to advocate that human nature has the possibility of being good, that the king should implement benevolent government, and that scholars should "know their vitality in order to nourish their awe-inspiring energy."

The following discusses Mencius' sports thoughts from three aspects.

2. Sports to Obtain "Vast, Flowing qi" through "Nurturing" thought

The "vast, flowing qi" 浩然之氣 is an important concept proposed by Mencius. He said, "I am good at nourishing my vast, flowing qi. 我善養吾浩然之氣"[1]. However, Mencius did not directly explain the concept of the "vast, flowing qi", saying that it was difficult to articulate clearly in words. He believed that this qi is consummately great and consummately strong. 至大至剛" and should be cultivated with righteousness and not injure it, it will fill the space between Heaven and earth. Since ancient times, interpretations of the "vast, flowing qi" have primarily focused on the level of personal moral cultivation. Zhu Xi 朱熹(1130-1200) explained, "flowing refers

to a grand and prevalent state. qi refers to what fills the body. It is inherently vast and flowing but loses its nourishment and becomes exhausted. Only Mencius is skilled at cultivating it to restore its original state." 浩然，盛大流行之貌。氣，即所謂體之充者。本自浩然，失養故餒，惟孟子為善養之以復其初也。[2]. From Zhu Xi's explanation, we can see that the so-called "vast, flowing qi" is not just a metaphysical spiritual qi but also requires physical cultivation. The physical qi is the foundation of the spiritual qi. The inherent material qi of the human body, after artificial cultivation, transforms into a "spiritual form[3]."

The concept of qi 氣 was not uniquely created by Mencius. It was already mentioned in *Lao Zi*. According to "Biography of Laozi" of *Shiji*, Laozi was a thinker in the Spring and Autumn period. He was earlier than Mencius. In the Chapter 42 of *Lao Zi*, it mentioned: "The myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two." 萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和" [4]. The qi mentioned by *Lao Zi* serves as a medium for the harmony of yin and yang and is an objective material existence. Similarly, the concept of qi is also used in *Zhuang Zi* and others. The concept of qi is not only confined to theoretical discussions but is also widely applied in the field of physical education. *Xingqiming* 行氣銘 (*Qi Flowing Inscription*) is a work in the late Warring States period that details the

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method of regulating breath. It tells how to control breathing: breathing deeply stores energy, which extends, descends, stabilizes, solidifies, germinates, grows, retreats, and reaches the heavens. Heaven's mechanism is above, and earth's mechanism is below [5]. This means that one should rhythmically regulate breathing to align with the body's natural functioning. Therefore, the "vast, flowing *qi*" proposed by Mencius refers to transforming the inherent "material *qi*" of the human body into "spiritual *qi*" through the practice of "nourishing *qi*." The "nourishing" here refers to a method of exercise that uses a process in which *qi* does work. It is an important part of physical exercise.

3. Emphasis on Participation and Finding "Joy" in Physical Education

In *Mencius*, Mencius said, "The ancients shared their joys with the people and it was this that enabled them to feel joy." 古之人與民偕樂，故能樂也[6]. This emphasizes the idea of rulers sharing joy with the people, reflecting Mencius' thought of that "kings bestows humane government on the people." "Joy" can be seen as the meeting point of physical education and aesthetic education, and it can also be the opportunity for the fusion of spirit and action. If a person's mental state is poor, manifesting as "no joy", their body will surely be affected. In traditional thought, "joy" has been mentioned by many thinkers and literati. Ancient people often recognized "joy" as an excellent state of both body and mind, which also aligns with the "vast, flowing *qi*" advocated by Mencius. In Mencius' view, the enrichment and satisfaction of the mind are greatly beneficial to physical health.

Therefore, in Mencius' view, the essence of sports activities lies in participation, and success or failure, superiority or inferiority, are unimportant. This is what is meant by "finding joy in it". He said, "Here we have a man who is not strong enough to lift a chicken; he is a man who lacks strength. If he now says that he can lift a hundred *jun*, he is a man of strength, for by lifting Wu Huo's burden one becomes Wu Huo. Why should one regard not yet having mastered something as a calamity? It is just that one has not done it.[7]" 有人於此，力不能勝一匹雞，則為無力人矣；今日舉百鈞，則為有力人矣。然則舉烏獲之任，是亦為烏獲而已矣。夫人豈以不勝為患哉？弗為耳。 Mencius means that whether lifting a chick or three thousand *jun*, they are both human. The strongman Wu Huo is also just a human. Who would blame you for being unable to lift a burden? Active participation is what is good. Mencius' understanding of the "joy" in sports does not deliberately pursue

the outcome of the competition but focuses more on the process of participation. Mencius said, "To die in the course of fulfilling the Way is a proper destiny, while dying in manacles and fetters is not a proper destiny[8]." This also means striving with all one's might to uphold inner morality. Thinking only leads to problems, while action provides answers. Even if the final result is not satisfactory, having pursued the process and exhausted all efforts is the best way to account for oneself. This thought superficially lowers the requirements for sports, not counting quantity or quality, but essentially encourages people to actively participate, continuously improve, grow from weakness to strength, and strive for victory. This shares the same value pursuit as the famous Olympic motto, "Participation is more important than winning."

4. Sports Cognition of "the Humane Man has no Enemy" 仁者無敵

Mencius had unique insights into sports through his concept of "benevolence." He believed that sports were a peaceful pursuit, where teachers and students should be affectionate, opponents should be friendly, and competitions should be conducted with charity. In the chapter "Li Lou II" 離婁下 of *Mencius*, there is a story recorded: "Peng Meng 逢蒙 learned archery from Yi 羿. When he had fully mastered Yi's Way, he thought that the only one in the world superior to himself was Yi. So he killed Yi[9]." Yi was the leader of the Youqiong tribe 有窮氏 in the Xia Dynasty, renowned for his bravery and archery skills. However, despite seizing control of the Xia government, he neglected civil affairs, indulged in hunting, and trusted the treacherous minister Han Zhuo. His student, Pang Meng, assisted Han Zhuo 寒泥 in killing Yi. Mencius commented, "Yi, too, was culpable in this[10]." It means that while Pang Meng was guilty of killing his teacher, Yi was also culpable for his unethical behavior.

Mencius opposed jealousy and brutality in sports and narrated another story to express his understanding of sports. The story goes: Zizhuo Ruzi 子濯孺子 taught Yin Gong Zhita 尹公之他 archery, and Yin Gong Zhita taught Yugong Zhisi 庾公之斯 archery. One day, Yugong Zhisi was ordered by his lord to pursue and kill his ancestor (teacher, Zizhuo Ruzi). The ancestor was ill and unable to lift his bow to defend himself. Yugong Zhisi, unwilling to use his ancestor's archery skills to kill him, removed the arrowheads and shot four arrows without tips back to his lord as a report[11]. Through this story, Mencius expressed his

admiration for the camaraderie between teachers and students in the sports community and emphasized that benevolence should be demonstrated in sports.

Mencius's concept of benevolence or humaneness was not only reflected in his admiration for the spirit of sports but also in his unique perspective on physical exercise. Due to the social environment and technological level of traditional society, ancient people universally pursued longevity. When summarizing the secrets of longevity, many often used Confucius's saying, "The benevolent are long-lived"[12] to illustrate the relationship between the body and the mind. Mencius used the "four limbs" of the body to metaphorically represent the benevolence and righteousness of the mind. He said in the text: "The mind's feeling of pity and compassion is the sprout of humaneness [*ren*仁]; the mind's feeling of shame and aversion is the sprout of rightness [*yi*義]; the mind's feeling of modesty and compliance is the sprout of propriety [*li*禮]; and the mind's sense of right and wrong is the sprout of wisdom [*zhi*智]" 惻隱之心，仁之端也。羞惡之心，義之端也。辭讓之心，禮之端也。是非之心，智之端也。人之有是四端也，猶其有四體也。[13]. This means that pity and compassion is the germination of humaneness, the sense of shame and aversion is the germination of righteousness, the mind of modesty and compliance is the beginning of propriety, and the sense and ability to distinguish right from wrong is the beginning of wisdom. Here, "humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom" are the four ethical virtues respected by Confucianism, collectively known as the "four virtues." Mencius believed that human nature, what distinguishes humans from animals, is the possession of these "minds": compassion, shame and aversion, modesty and compliance, and the ability to distinguish right from wrong. They are the germinations of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom, the most precious things in a person, harboring all possibilities for human perfection and development. Among these, humaneness is the core of the "four virtues." Mencius said, "the humane man has no enemy" and the original meaning of humaneness included the idea of motivating oneself to become a class elite.

Additionally, there is another interpretation of "One who is humane loves other people"仁者愛人[14] and "the humane man has no enemy"[15], which means that the upper class in society should love others, and social elites can remain invincible. In Mencius's cognition of sports, he equated archery and defense with benevolence and righteousness. He said, "One

who would be humane is like the archer. 仁者如射"[16] thereby elevating the spiritual connotation of sports. Mencius also said, "The archer corrects his position and then shoots. If he shoots and misses he does not blame those who are more adept than he; rather, he turns within and seeks within himself." 射者正己而後發，發而不中，不怨勝己者，反求諸己而已矣[17]. What Mencius meant by "The archer corrects his position and then shoots" is that an archer trains diligently, possesses superb skills, has a clear target, is spirited and composed, and then controls the bowstring to shoot. The sentence "If he shoots and misses he does not blame those who are more adept than he" refers to not blaming competitors who win the contest when the arrow misses the target, but first looking for subjective reasons such as inadequate skills, lack of strength, or judgment errors, and then considering objective reasons like sudden changes in wind or unexpected movements of the target. Mencius emphasized the "corrects his position" (rectify themselves) spirit in athletic competitions, advocating that in sports competitions, one should start from oneself and, even in the face of failure, reflect and learn from it to improve. In short, in athletic competitions, one should "rectify themselves and not blame others."

5. Conclusion

The above discusses Mencius' sports thoughts from three aspects. They are: Sports to obtain "vast, flowing *qi*" through "nurturing" thought, Emphasis on Participation and Finding "Joy" in physical education. Sports Cognition of "the humane man has no enemy". His sports thoughts are the inheritance and development of Confucius' sports thoughts[18].

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