Международные отношения и внешняя политика

国际关系与对外政策

International Relations and Foreign Policy

Научная статья
УДК 327.33
EDN IKSITL
DOI 10.17150/2587-7445.2025.9(3).268-278

Философия Мэн-цзы и Сюнь-цзы как наследие конфуцианства в сфере международной политики Китая

Сун Ю
Даляньский университет иностранных языков,
г. Далянь, Китайская Народная Республика

А. Бикерниеце
Даляньский университет иностранных языков,
г. Далянь, Китайская Народная Республика

Дата поступления: 19.05.2025
Дата принятия к печати: 17.10.2025
Дата онлайн-размещения: 19.11.2025

Аннотация. Мэн-цзы и Сюнь-цзы — два классика китайской философии, оказавшие глубокое влияние на политическую доктрину Китая. Внешняя политика и международная позиция Китая находятся под глубоким влиянием традиционной философии, главным образом Конфуция, в развитие которой Сюнь-цзы и Мэн-цзы внесли значительный вклад. Можно заметить, что в современных международных отношениях Мэн-цзы доминирует в китайской политике, поскольку его основные идеи «внутренней доброты» и «доброжелательности» отражены в многосторонней политике Китая и взаимном уважении. Однако Сюнь-цзы, будучи сторонником идеи «злой природы» человека, все же отражает некоторые другие элементы китайской позиции. В статье дается оценка и сравнение двух философских подходов и рассматривается их роль в современной китайской внешней политике.

Ключевые слова. Конфуцианство, Мэн-цзы, Сюнь-цзы, внутренняя доброта, злая природа, внешняя политика Китая, Пять принципов мирного сосуществования, Общее будущее человечества.

Финансирование. Статья является результатом исследования «Идеи и политика международной коммуникации китайской культуры в новую эпоху с точки зрения “Диалога цивилизаций”» при поддержке «Проект исследовательского фонда Даляньского университета иностранных языков 2021 года», № 2021XJYB27.

科学文章

孟子和荀子哲学：儒家思想对中国外交政策的遗产

孙钰
大连外国语大学,
大连市, 中国

A. Bikerniece
大连外国语大学,
大连市, 中国

摘要：荀子与孟子是两位对中国政治思想产生深远影响的中国哲学经典人物。中国的外交政策与国际立场深受传统哲学影响，尤其是以孔子为代表的思想体系，而荀子与孟子对此体系的发展作出了重大贡献。值得注意的是，在当代国际关系中，孟子思想在中国政策中占据主导地位，其核心理念“内在的善”与“善意”体现在中国的多边政策和相互尊重原则中。然而，作为“人性本恶”思想的拥护者，荀子仍体现了中国立场中的某些其他要素。本文对两种哲学思想进行了评估和比较，并探讨了它们在当代中国外交政策中的作用。

关键词：儒家思想，孔子，孟子，内在的善，邪恶本性，中国外交政策，和平共处五项原则，人类共同未来。

结稿日期：2025年05月19日
出版日期：2025年10月17日
网上出版日期：2025年11月19日

资助：本文是"'文明对话'视阈下新时代中国文化国际传播观念与策略研究"项目的成果，该项目由"大连外国语大学2021年度校级科研基金项目"（编号：2021XJYB27）资助。

Original article

Mencius and Xunzi Philosophy as a Legacy of Confucianism in the Area of Chinese Foreign Policy

Sun Yu
Dalian University of Foreign Languages,
Dalian, People's Republic of China

A. Bikerniece
Dalian University of Foreign Languages,
Dalian, People's Republic of China

Received: 2025 May 19
Accepted: 2025 October 17
Available online: 2025 November 19

Abstract. Mencius and Xunzi are two classics of Chinese philosophy that have profound influence on Chinese political and foreign doctrine. Chinese foreign policy and international stance are deeply influenced by traditional philosophy, mostly Confucius, to which Mencius and Xunzi are a significant contribution and extension. One can observe that in the modern international relations Mencius dominates Chinese politics with his core ideas of "inner goodness" and "benevolence" reflected in China's multilateral policy and mutual respect. Xunzi, however, being a supporter of the idea of "evil nature" of human beings, still reflects some other elements of Chinese stance. The paper evaluates and compares the two philosophical approaches and examines their role in Modern Chinese foreign policy.

Keywords. Confucianism, Mencius, Xunzi, inner goodness, evil nature, China's foreign policy, Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, Shared Future for the Mankind.

Funding. This paper is the outcome of Research on the Ideas and Policies of International Communication of Chinese Culture in the New Era from the Perspective of "Dialogue of Civilizations". Research project supported by "2021 Dalian University of Foreign Languages Research Fund Project", No. 2021XJYB27.

Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed the significant transformation of China into a major global actor. Chinese leadership acknowledged challenges related to this rise and launched a policy of China's "opening up": explaining Chinese political and economic incentives to the world. This resulted into several attempts to introduce Chinese perspective on international development: Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) are extensions of China's "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" and resulted into formulation of "Shared Future for the Mankind" policy in 2024. A crystallized version of Chinese foreign policy, nevertheless, is not only the result of decades-long evolution of People's Republic of China policy. The roots of the policy lie deeply in Chinese identity and philosophy, namely Confucianism, which modern Chinese state greatly applied and adopted to the current reality. The paper explores a relevant synthesis of major Confucian Chinese philosophic thoughts of Mencius and Xunzi, presenting two approaches to peoples' understanding of life — "inner goodness" and "evil nature". This defines the relevance of the paper, as China's opening up policy is still undergoing, and understanding Chinese foreign policy using traditional philosophic perspective is a potential way of understanding China.

The research methods include a critical analysis of works by Confucius, Xunzi and Mencius, comparison and a correlation study of Xunzi's and Mencius's major philosophical ideas as sources of current principles of China's foreign relations.

The article lays the foundation for further study of China's foreign policy through the prism of ancient philosophical teachings and application of these philosophies to contemporary international processes' understanding.

Basic Confucius ideas

Confucianism places central importance on the cultivation of virtue through both personal effort and engagement within the community. Among its most crucial concepts are Ren (仁), Li (礼), and Yi

(义), which together form a foundation for ethical conduct and social harmony.

Ren (仁) is perhaps the most fundamental Confucian virtue, often translated as "benevolence", "humanity", "care" or "love" [1]. At its core, Ren signifies a deep care and altruistic concern for others. Confucius himself is recorded as defining it succinctly: "Ren is to love your fellow men" (仁者爱人) [2, p. 116]. Ren encompasses two related senses. The first is altruism, which emphasizes genuine compassion, love, and concern for the well-being of others, starting within the family. As Confucius said, "...The gentleman operates at the root. When the root is firm, then the Way may proceed. Filial and brotherly conduct—these are the root of humaneness, are they not?" [3, p. 16]. Filial piety and brotherly respect are considered the "root of Ren" and extending outwards. The second aspect of Ren is perfect virtue. In this broader sense, Ren represents the aggregate moral perfection achieved through the cultivation and practice of other specific virtues. Confucius indicated this when stating that achieving Ren involves practicing "courtesy, tolerance, trustworthiness, diligence and kindness" [ibid, p. 121]. Furthermore, Ren involves a reciprocal element, famously expressed as: "...The humane person wants standing, and so he helps others to gain standing. He wants achievement, and so he helps others to achieve..." [ibid, p. 48]. It constitutes the foundation and basis for moral behavior and is considered the highest moral principle within Confucianism.

Li (礼), often translated as ritual, rites, or propriety, is a concept of central importance in Confucian ethics, extending far beyond simple ceremony to structure social interaction and moral development. It provides the essential framework for social and institutional life. As Gao Ming points out, "from Confucius onwards, all of [China's] institutions have existed within [the framework of] li. If there were no li, then the basis for every institution would be lost" [4]. The concept of Li, while possibly originating from religious sacrificial practices, evolved to broadly signify ritualized conduct in many forms. Some interpretations even align it with understandings of natural law. It functions as a comprehensive set of behavioral prescriptions that structure relationships among people, between humans and spiritual realms, and within familial and broader societal contexts. The application of Li extends to interactions concerning the natural world and physical objects as well. Li operates as the set of societal norms for correct behavior, traditionally imparted through family and community leadership. Adherence to these norms is seen as crucial for maintaining social stability and harmony. The practice and teaching associated with Li actively cultivate core ethical ideals central to Confucianism, such as respect for parents (filial piety), deference to elders, trustworthiness, righteousness, and loyalty.

Li is intrinsically linked to Ren. One academic interpretation proposes understanding "Li as a cultural grammar and Ren as the mastery of a culture," where "society cultivates its members through li toward the goal of Ren, and persons of Ren manifest their human excellence through their practice of Li" [5]. While Li involves observable actions, its authentic practice demands inner sincerity and reverence; mere outward performance is considered insufficient in Confucian ethics. Engaging with Li is a vital part of self-cultivation. It involves internalizing established social actions, which provides individuals with a connection to tradition while potentially heightening their experiential awareness. In essence, Li provides the indispensable structure within Confucianism for enacting ethical relationships and societal norms. It is fundamental to social order, the cultivation of key virtues, and the appropriate expression of inner morality (Ren), contributing to both collective harmony and personal ethical growth.

Yi (义) stands as a cornerstone virtue within the complex ethical framework of Confucianism. It is often translated as "righteousness", "appropriateness", "rightness" or "duty", reflecting its multifaceted nature. Fundamentally, Yi concerns moral propriety—the quality of understanding and performing actions that are correct and fitting within the intricate web of social contexts and human relationships. The essence of Yi is deeply tied to situational and relational appropriateness. It requires a nuanced understanding of specific circumstances rather than adherence to rigid, universal rules detached from context. Scholarly interpretations differentiate between understanding Yi as focusing on "what is appropriate to do" in a given situation, and emphasizing "the intellectual quality of judging and doing what is appropriate" [6]. This suggests Yi involves both the recognition of the right action and the capacity to execute it. Yi is frequently associated with a strong sense of moral obligation and duty. While sometimes contrasted with Ren (often seen as stemming from innate compassion), Yi provides a compelling directive force. Xunzi used to frame Yi as potentially being "a principle of inner compulsion that generates action through the shameful feeling of an 'unfilled duty" [7]. This highlights the internal, motivating aspect of Yi. Lu Yinghua, while noting translations

like “duty”, “righteousness” or “rightness,” argues that Yi (like Ren) possesses an internal dimension, too. Its basic requirement is not transgressing justice and keeping away from shame and disdain [8]. Importantly, fulfilling Yi is often more demanding than simply meeting basic obligations; true righteousness frequently becomes apparent when an individual makes a morally correct choice despite potential personal cost or sacrifice, acting out of conviction rather than mere compliance.

Despite all the changes and reformations in Modern Chinese state, the model of the political system contains the main elements that were traditional in Confucian times. E.T. Karaev argues that Confucianism became deeply integrated not only in social life of Chinese society, but became an intrinsic part of mass consciousness [9, p. 13]. Traditionally there is “lack of distinction between human relations and heavenly relations and an identity between the ethical and political” [10, p. 130]. This defines the deep effect Confucianism has on Chinese politics both domestically and internationally. Even though Marxism dominates the political doctrine of China, it has been reshaped to meet Chinese reality, to a significant level with the Confucianism in mind. According to E.O. Reznikova, the main trait of Chinese political system and its philosophy of identity is patriarchal-paternal concept [11, p. 947]. The concept is the key of Confucian philosophy and advocates societal hierarchy. In politics and international relations, this finds its way in the idea that a political leader is the ‘father’ to the nation and a worthy advocate of its state’s interests on the international arena. The state should achieve harmony between leaders and subordinates, and create a social order where everyone lives in harmony with nature, itself and others [12, p. 80]. The state establishes its relationships with the subjects based on virtue, moral, humanism, but also strict order control [13, p. 65]. Interestingly, Confucius advocated for the rule of moral principles, and not the rule of laws. This, however, has transformed in Modern China into a complex symbiosis where moral is prevailing at the individual level, but laws construct the framework defining structure within which people and states operate using their individual moral. According to S.Zhang, the law plays a supplementary role in the overall paradigm of rule of morality as Confucius juxtaposed “rituals” (礼) and “morality” (德) against “law” (法) and “punishment” (刑) [14, p. 130]. Moreover, for Confucians, it is simply “improper to punish without education” [ibid, p. 134], while not only is the law moralized, it is also politicized [14, p. 135]. Combined together, this creates a self-sufficient complex framework of laws in Modern Chinese state within which people operate based on their morality and virtues.

Altogether, the idea of junzi (君子) [15, p. 103] unites personal and political approaches. According to the original philosophy, junzi (君子) is a Confucian high-minded person. The Government has applied this to the domestic politics initially, to create an image of political leadership as one possessing moral qualities to lead the people and improve the state of affairs. At the same time, China is using the same symbolism on the international arena, where China creates an image of a state possessing high integrity standards and making other states follows its lead not by persuasion but by personal example and positive attraction. Apart from evaluating and rethinking traditional Confucian ideas, modern philosophers care about bridging Confucian philosophy with world ideologies and national spirit [16, p. 882]. According to S.I. Kushnir, this makes Chinese political system seamless and self-sufficient [17, p. 26] as it provides the political initiatives with flexibility and readiness to adjust keeping the core philosophical values.

Confucianism locates virtue practice in the cultivation of the inner, personal mind. It does not require any type of particular craft activities or other specialized ability, only demanding that one devote oneself body and mind to the task and focus one’s entire spirit on the development of the ideal inner character [10, p. 138]. Thus it makes people (and states) focus on their improvement, and not intervene into others’ improvement process. This reflects general non-intervention of Chinese foreign policy stance.

The Confucian scholars argued “to govern benevolently is to love the people” (仁者爱人) [14, p. 71]. Since 2002, the fourth generation of the CCP leadership led by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao adopted the principle of “People First” to pursue their politics and policies, which has been aptly dubbed as “minsheng politics” (民生政治) [ibid]. And this approach can be traced up to current times. The Confucian political and moral philosophy is built on the basis of strong conviction to the existence of the way. Confucius was not simply arguing for such an idealized society; he knew it existed and therefore it could exist [ibid, p. 79].

Xunzi and Mencius as extensions of Confucianism

Confucius laid foundation for the social system of China that is relevant up to day. His ideas, however, were further extended to meet more social

and political realities. Mencius and Xunzi stand as two of most significant figures in classical Confucianism after Confucius himself. Both were deeply engaged with the foundational teachings of Confucius but developed distinct philosophical systems, particularly regarding their understanding of human nature (xing 性) and the optimal strategies for achieving social order and moral cultivation. They are considered vital extensions of the Confucian tradition precisely because they elaborated upon, and sometimes diverged from, Confucius's ideas, thereby enriching the discourse on ethics, human psychology, and political philosophy.

Despite their famous disagreement on human nature, both thinkers operated firmly within the Confucian framework and saw themselves as defending and developing the tradition. Both Mencius and Xunzi regard themselves as stern defenders of Confucianism of their times, and they agree to a large extent on the contents and requirements of Confucian ethics and politics. They shared core Confucian goals, such as the perfectibility of human beings and the need for virtuous leadership. As noted by David Wong, Mencius and Xunzi "held in common the belief that leadership needed to undergo a moral transformation… guided by moral values" [18]. Their primary focus, like Confucius's, was practical: understanding how individuals could become morally good and how the society could achieve stability and harmony.

Mencius and Xunzi are crucial extensions of Confucianism because they took foundational concepts from Confucius (Ren, Li, Yi) and rigorously developed them into systematic, albeit contrasting, theories about the source of morality (human nature) and the means to achieve social harmony (governance and self-cultivation).

Mencius (Meng K'e, 孟子, 372–289 B.C.). Key ideas of Mencius and their application to foreign policy

Mencius developed his philosophy in a relatively peaceful environment of 4-5 BC China [19, p. 29] when Chinese state was in an active phase of consolidation. At the time, two kinds of state existed in the political imagination: the idealized historical memory of the "kingly" government (legitimized power of the moral and benevolent rulers) and governments by naked force (power seized by strong and immoral leaders). Under such circumstances, Mencius strengthened the connection between benevolent ruling and legitimacy [14, p. 87]. Mencian philosophy became an extension of Confucianism with its main contribution of 'innate goodness' of all human beings. According to him, "human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downwards" [20, p. 211].

Mencian biggest philosophical account, known as the "Account of Four Buds" (四端说) laid a systemic description of human nature and its connection to society. He argued that humans are born possessing four innate qualities—benevolence (仁), righteousness (义), respect for propriety (礼), and intelligence (智) [14, p.81]. Mencius extended Confucian 'ren' into "a systemic political philosophy" [19, p. 26]. Benevolence is the heart of man, and rightness his road [20, p. 220] as Mencius puts it, while propriety and intelligence are the behavior patterns. "Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will and this is the shortest way to benevolence" [ibid, p. 241] — indicated Mencius the golden rule of etiquette. With these in mind, he argued that "the benevolent man has no match" [2ibid p. 74] and as a result, the sovereign lies in the people [14, p. 88]. Thus, for Mencius, society consists of benevolent people who become a solid foundation and support for the state.

The society is multilayered. The individual, traditionally, succumbs to the social in Chinese society. The family becomes a society-constructing body. According to Mencius, the original state of family depends on four elements (the four moral sprouts — siduan): the *commiseration*, the *awareness of shame and distaste*, the *sentiment of modesty and yielding*, and the *sense of the right and the wrong* [19, p. 34]. The channeling of these sprouts, these elements in every person within the family in the right direction results in benevolent, courteous and rightful person. This results in benevolent and moral citizens for the state. The one who observes the right elements should master the wrong too. The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the heart of the right and the wrong, of wisdom [20, p. 111]. These four elements can develop into Confucian true morals — ren, li and yi. In stressing commiseration over feeling of the right and the wrong, Mencius puts feeling over knowing [19, p. 35]. In projection to China's international stance, this means that even before knowing details about others and others' incentives, China strives to positively evaluate the relationships. And with the positive attitude comes the will to understand and learn, which is also invaluable in international arena but can not be achieved without prior personal incentive build on personal feelings.

With every person being in harmony with himself and mastering the moral principles, everyone can find the suitable place for himself or herself in the society. As Mencius puts it, “now if you should practice benevolence in the government of your state, then all those in the Empire who seek once would wish to find a place at your court, all tillers of land to till the land in outlying parts of your realm, all merchants to enjoy the refuge of your market-place, all travelers to go by way of your roads, and all those who hate their rulers to lay their complaints before you” [20, p. 80].

Mencian innate goodness and moral principles have even further application to Chinese political stance. E.T. Karaev highlights Mencian moral principles of the society that the Government should help to form [9, p. 789]. If the society has high moral principles, then the state will enjoy stability and prosperity. If, for some reason, the innately good people acquired negative moral principles, then they will turn against the Government and destroy the order. In this process, the Government plays a critical role in crystallizing state moral principles and promoting innate goodness of its citizens following Mencian concept of “the state for the people”. Chinese Government constantly stresses the role of people in promotion of Chinese image. Thus, it highlights the important role of its citizens. As Mencius puts it, “if those who own land within each ching (approximately 30 cm, meaning very close to you) become and stay friends both at home and abroad, help each other to keep watch, and succor each other in illness, they will live in love and harmony”. [20, p. 134] The principles of Shared Future for the Mankind reflect this Mencian idea of the mutual respect and cooperation in people-to-state relations and in relations of Chinese citizens with foreign people. The idea focuses on exchanging good moral principles across the planet and exercise goodly attitude towards others both domestically and abroad that can contribute to better understanding among nations and build profound friendly relationships.

Another important element of Mencian philosophy is leadership. According to E.O. Reznikova, Mencius focused on the traits innate to the political leader [11, p. 948]. He projected the idea of ren (benevolence) onto political leaders of the country: “only the benevolent man is to be in high position” [20, p.158] and “when the prince is benevolent, everyone else is benevolent; when the prince is dutiful, everyone else is dutiful” [ibid, p. 172]. For the leader is not enough to rule, but lead setting personal example. If the leader is benevolent, the people are benevolent, if the leader is righteous, the people are righteous, if the leader exercises propriety and intelligence, then the people exercise propriety and intelligence. If the leader wants to change his subordinates he should start with himself, as “there has never been a man who could straighten others by bending himself” [20, p. 144]. Moreover, for Mencius, a leader should emphasize joy and happiness (positive attitudes), not just for him, but also for his people. As the philosopher puts it, “now if you shared your enjoyment with the people, you would be a true King” [ibid, p. 84].

Mencius contributed not only to the area of human nature and leadership qualities. He created a systemic philosophical study that also embraced relationship in broader sense. When discussing the nature of ill-doing he highlighted the responsibility of both sides. “If others do not respond to your love with love, look into your own benevolence; if others fail to respond to your attempts to govern them with order, look into your own wisdom; if others do not return your courtesy, look into your own respect. In other words, look into yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose” [ibid, p. 160]. The importance for self-examination and self-improvement are justified, according to Mencius. If the benevolence, righteousness, propriety and intelligence fail, then no good comes. For Mencius, “only when a man invites insult will others insult him. Only when a family invites destruction will others destroy it. Only when a state invites invasion will others invade it” [ibid, p. 162].

Altogether, Mencian philosophy has a profound impact on the current Chinese policy. For the state relies on good citizens, who develop their “good nature” through self-improvement and moral leadership of the Government. With this harmonious relationship, the state relies on people and people rely on the state that can act accordingly in its relationship to other states.

Xunzi (荀子 or 荀況, 313–238 B.C. Xun Ze, Master Xun, Xun Kuang or Hsun Tzu). Key ideas of Xunzi and their application to foreign policy

Xunzi lived in a time of Late Warring kingdoms [19, p. 55], when the model of a hegemonic, bureaucratic, and centralized state authority was already firmly in place, and he recognized the necessity of a more authoritarian, rule-based state control [14, p. 88]. He stands as a pivotal figure in classical Confucianism, offering what T.C. Kline III and P.J. Ivanhoe describe as potentially “the sin-

gle most sophisticated philosophical explanation and defense of the Confucian point of view" from the Warring States period [21, ix]. A self-identified follower of Confucius, Xunzi systematically addressed ethics, ritual (li 礼), governance, human nature (xing 性), learning (xue 学), and cosmology, opposing himself to major existing philosophical schools. He is renowned for his influential, though controversial, doctrine that human nature is bad (xing e 性恶) and his profound emphasis on the transformative power of conscious, deliberate effort (wei 伪), particularly through ritual practice and learning, to cultivate virtue and achieve social order. His work represents a pragmatic and highly developed strand of Confucian thought.

Central to Xunzi's philosophy is his direct refutation of Mencius regarding human nature. He asserts unequivocally, "People's nature is bad. Their goodness is a matter of deliberate effort (伪)" [22, p. 248]. For Xunzi, xing (性) denotes the innate, unlearned capacities and spontaneous dispositions present at birth, including basic desires: "people's nature is such that they are born with a fondness for profit... feelings of hate and dislike... desires of the eyes and ears..." [22]. Left unchecked, these inherent tendencies inevitably lead to social conflict: "If they follow along with this, then struggle and contention will arise..." [ibid]. Thus, nature is "bad" (e 恶) because, as Antonio Cua interprets, its "characteristic tendency... leads to strife and disorder, consequences which are undesirable from the moral point of view understood in terms of ren (benevolence) and li (ritual propriety) and yi (rightness)" [23, p. 43] Tang Siufu further clarifies that Xunzi sees nature as bad because it inherently lacks an "ethical framework" and possesses "no internal inclination towards the acquisition" of one [24].

Despite this view of nature, Xunzi maintains a robust Confucian optimism about human perfectibility, achievable through wei (伪) — deliberate effort or conscious activity. Goodness is not innate but acquired. Wei signifies the purposeful human actions involving thought, learning, and practice that transform raw nature, which is a process of reforming or recasting our crude natures. Learning (xue 学) is the primary means of this transformation. Xunzi insists, "Learning must never stop" [22, p. 1], viewing it as a lifelong process of self-cultivation and self-improvement that shapes character like wood being straightened or metal being sharpened. Crucially, learning requires external guidance because nature is insufficient: humans "must await teachers and proper models, and only then do they become correct. They must obtain ritual and yi, and only then do they become well ordered" [22, p. 248]. A. Stalnaker outlines the Xunzian process as involving study, ritual practice, music, and critical engagement with a teacher, leading ultimately until moral action becomes a second nature [24, p. 36]. The process demands persistence; Xunzi emphasizes the "accumulation" (ji 积) of good deeds and effort to reach sage-hood. Ritual propriety (Li 礼) is an indispensable tool created by the ancient sage kings to counteract the disorder stemming from human nature's desires clashing over limited resources. Xunzi explains, "the former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and yi [rightness/duty] in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking" [22, p. 201]. Thus, for Xunzi the law as an instrument to reinforce the ritual system [14, p. 132]. He supports the idea that state governing is based on "ritual outside and law inside" [19, p. 56].

Li functions primarily by establishing social divisions (fen 分) and defining roles within a hierarchical structure, thereby channeling desires and preventing conflict. For Xunzi, humans require a community (qun 群), but a community requires divisions articulated through Li and Yi to function harmoniously. Li provides the patterns for civilized life, guiding conduct in all domains. It serves both to structure a society externally and to shape an individual internally. Xunzi asserts its fundamental role: "Ritual is that by which to correct your person" [22, p. 14].

Xunzi adopts a largely naturalistic view on Heaven (Tian 天). Xunzi's Tian operates with impersonal regularity: "There is a constancy to the activities of Heaven" [ibid, p. 175]. Its processes, such as seasons, celestial movements, are independent of human actions or morality. Humanity's task is not to influence Heaven but to understand its patterns and focus on managing the human sphere. Berkson notes that while Xunzi, perhaps influenced by Daoists, saw Heaven as indifferent, he firmly rejected Daoist withdrawal, insisting instead on active human effort to create order [24, p. 257]. Xunzi emphasizes the "triad" formed by Heaven, Earth, and humans, each with its domain: "The heavens have their seasons, earth has its riches, the man has his rule" [ibid, p. 331]. Humans should focus on establishing good governance (zhi 治) within their sphere, utilizing the regularities of nature.

Xunzi's political philosophy logically extends from his views on human nature and ritual. Good governance requires establishing the ritual order (Li) and social distinctions (fen) necessary to prevent chaos and guide people towards goodness.

While acknowledging the need for standards and punishments, Xunzi, as a Confucian, privileges moral leadership. The ideal ruler governs through virtue (de 德) and the proper application of Li and Yi. Xunzi, like Mencius, aimed to transform the ruler's motivation towards the public good, but Xunzi placed greater emphasis on "ritual institutions" as the means to structure government and constrain power, formulating a sophisticated reformulation of Confucian political ideas. Henry Rosemont Jr. highlights Xunzi's focus on the state's role in managing scarcity ("desires are many, things are few") and promoting social welfare through institutions grounded in Li [21, p. 18]. Xunzi presents a robust, coherent, and deeply pragmatic Confucian vision. Grounded in the premise that innate human nature tends towards disorder, his philosophy champions the transformative power of human culture, embodied in learning (xue), deliberate effort (wei), and above all, ritual propriety (Li), as the means to achieve both individual moral perfection and collective social harmony. His naturalistic view on Heaven underscores human responsibility for creating an ethical and well-ordered world.

Even despite the state acknowledgement of human "good nature", Chinese Government recognizes the necessity for constant learning and deliberate effort for self-improvement. It might not recognize openly "evil nature" of humans, but deliberately pursues "moral framework" through education and rituals, advocated by Xunzi. In international relations, China also constantly highlights the necessity for improvement and legal and moral regulation that were promoted by Xunzi philosophy.

Applying Xunzi and Mencian ideas to Modern Foreign policy of China

Mencius and Xunzi have profound impact on Chinese social and political philosophy. Xunzi, however, had considerably less influence on subsequent thought than Mencius, and there are two reasons for that. First, Mencius became a more notorious and eloquent writer, which was crucial for Chinese society. "When in T'ang times Han Yü raised the banner of the ku wen movement, he looked to Mencius as much for his superb style as for his sound philosophy" [20, p.10]. Second, with the spread of Mencius thought, his ideas became orthodox for many.

At the same time, similarities of the two philosophers' approaches make them invaluable contributors to modern Chinese thought. For once, Xunzi and Mencius overlap in their approaches to foreign politics. They both underline importance of the state in intersate relations highlighting peaceful and constructive dialogue. Despite the different points of departure of Mencius and Xunzi, as Mote noted, "both believe in government, both accept the rightness of absolute ethical values, both value civilization, and both regard humanity as more important than the rest of nature" [14, p. 88].

However, they have significant differences in other areas. With Xunzi highlighting 'evil' nature of human being and Mencius stressing 'good' nature, they disagree on the core approach to understanding international relations. According to Xunzi, one should expect a bad outcome and more tendency to conflict among people that can result into clashes. Mencius, on the contrary, stresses positive agenda and tendency for people to find a peaceful way of coexistence.

Up until Modern times both, Xunzi and Mencius find their way in the Chinese International stance. Currently, Mencius' ideology prevails, but one can see Xunzi in Chinese great power as well. Chinese Government applies all philosophies to the new reality and this reflects the part of Chinese identity to take traditions and adopt them to contemporary situation combining with new developments. Altogether, this approach makes Chinese foreign policy flexible and solid at the same time. Without doubt, Chinese philosophy has its limits on Chinese foreign policy. However, Mencian and Xunzi's philosophies are traced in modern Chinese policies.

The oldest and most basic description of Chinese stance is traced in the Five Principles of peaceful coexistence. The principles include "mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence"[1]. Further explanation of these principles resulted into the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative, altogether combined in Shared Future for the Mankind principles.

The principles focus on[2]:

1. Promoting global governance that features extensive consultation and joint contribution for shared benefit.

[1] Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence — timeless guide for int'l relations // The State Council. The People's Republic of China. 2024. 29 June. URL: https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202406/29/content_WS667f6667c6d0868f4e8e8af9.html (accessed: 04.11.2024).

[2] Position Paper of the People's Republic of China for The Summit of the Future and the 79th Session of The United Nations General Assembly // Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The People's Republic of China. 2024. 19 September. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjzc/202409/t20240920_11493896.html (accessed: 04.11.2024).

2. Apply the common values of humanity.

3. Building a new type of international relations.

4. Implementation of the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI).

5. The platform for action is high-quality Belt and Road cooperation.

Among these principles, the Global Civilization Initiative is closer to unveiling Chinese thought and its impact on the Government approach to international relations. The major elements of the initiative include (1) mutual respect, (2) cultural exchange, (3) common development, (4) non-interference and (5) multilateralism [25]. Although most of these principles follow the global tendencies for state representation at the international arena, some outline adherence to purely Confucian thoughts. Peaceful co-existence reflects Confucian non-intervention and exercise of benevolence. Shared benefit and joint contribution reflect Mencian approach to shared responsibility and need for everyone to find its proper place. Cultural exchange and common development reflect both Mencian aspiration for self-improvement and Xunzi's idea of constant learning in order to master one's evil nature.

In general, Modern Chinese initiatives apparently serve to present China as a virtuous and benevolent leader that can exercise propriety and intelligence. As a friendly and open partner, it presents itself as "good-natured" and attempts to see others the same way. At the same time, some staleness of responses to critique and reminding of its military and economic capacities reflect readiness to exercise Xunzi's idea of seeing "evil nature" of state actors. This reflects deep roots of Chinese traditional philosophy in Chinese identity, and the flexibility of traditions in combination with modern changes. In general, Chinese philosophy possesses important elements that everyone can benefit from while constructing "Shared Future for the Mankind", and the Government of China aspires to prove this point to be ready to defend its position.

Inferences and conclusion

Understanding basic principles of Confucianism is understanding the logic behind Chinese incentives and views on international relations. The basis of Confucian ideas is rooted in three virtues — ren (benevolence), li (rites), yi (righteousness). Confucian benevolence embraces two aspects — altruism, or humanness, and moral perfection. The person who possesses ren, is a worthy person. Li infiltrates every moment of human life, and defines social and moral behaviour of a person in every social situation. Yi defines moral duty and obligations, and is closely linked to ren and li. Altogether the three create the solid foundation for a good citizen and a moral person. These ideas not only define everyday social life but also extend to state level, becoming an intrinsic part of social, political and cultural understanding; and continue influencing social and political processes even nowadays. Confucianism, however, is not limited to Confucius only, with more prominent philosophers Mencius and Xunzi adding to the philosophical thought, especially in terms of politics and international affairs. Both philosophers built on Confucian thoughts by examining the human nature. Although their perception of human nature is totally contradictory — Mencius advocating for "good nature" and Xunzi advocating for "evil nature", their philosophies expand Confucianism beyond Confucian classics.

Mencius extended the idea of ren, li and yi, adding other dimensions of propriety and intelligence. Only by combining benevolence and righteousness with propriety and intelligence can a person develop true "ren", "li" and "yi". Thus, Mencius advocated for the proper mastering of personal values, as the result of which a person can become a rightful part of the society. With everyone in their places, the society (and therefore the state) operates well and good-naturally. At the same time, Mencius highlighted the duties of the leaders, promoting the idea of "moral leadership". Only if the leader is worthy and is a role model for his subordinates, will the subordinates exercise the virtues and follow the leader. With human good nature in mind, Mencius believed in state reliance on people and great role of moral and dutiful leadership.

Xunzi, with his belief in "evil nature" of people, believed in more centralized and consolidated state that does not just lead the people but exercises control over them to provide an effective state. He focused on li (rituals) as key in organizing the society through learning (xue) and deliberate effort (wei). Even though Xunzi is pessimistic about human nature, he believes that people can achieve goodness through self-control and constant learning. Rituals and rites (li) are the key to help people limit their evil desires, thus li becomes central in shaping peoples' moral conduct, stressing the rule of law and importance of social division.

One can see Confucian philosophy in Chinese foreign policy — in Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence and Shared Future for the Mankind

and in attempt's to explain itself through these policies and initiatives. Chinese Government presents itself as an advocate of Mencian philosophy at its core, presenting itself as a good-natured, moral global actor, aiming at moral and intelligent leadership. At the same time, some elements of Xunzi's philosophy also find their way in China's foreign policy, such as advocating constant learning and striving for constant self-improvement. Thus, Chinese politics in general operates as a moral advocate of Mencian principles but eyeing Xunzi ideas as well.

References

1. Zhang Q. Humanity or Benevolence? The Interpretation of Confucian Ren and Its Modern Implications. *Human Dignity in Classical Chinese Philosophy.* New York, 2016, pp. 53–72.

2. Confucius; Lau D.C. (translated). *The Analects*. New York, Penguin, 1979. 281p.

3. Confucius; Watson B. (translated). *The Analects of Confucius.* New York, Columbia University Press, 2007. Bk. 1. 176 p.

4. Moores S. The Evolution and Adaptability of Li in the Philosophy of Kang Youwei. In Cheng A., Feuillas S. (eds). *All about the Rites*. Paris, Collège de France, 2023, pp. 347–368.

5. Li Ch. Li as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation Between Li and Ren in Confucius' Analects. *Philosophy East and West*, 2007, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 311–329.

6. Yu J. Yi: Practical Wisdom in Confucius's "Analects". *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 2006, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 335–348.

7. Huang Y. From Virtue to Duty: Xunzis Gong-Yi (公義) and the Institutionalization of Public Obligation in Early Confucianism. *Religions,* 2025, vol. 16, no. 3, p. 268.

8. Lu Y. Shame and the Confucian Idea of Yi (Righteousness). *International Philosophical Quarterly,* 2018, vol. 58, no. 1, pp. 5–18.

9. Karaev E.T. The Category „Li" (Chinese: 礼) in Confucian Philosophical System. *Nauka v zhizni cheloveka = Science in Human Life* , 2024, no. 2, pp. 5–14. (In Russian). EDN: GFYLED.

10. Wang R.R. *Chinese Philosophy in an Era of Globalization*. New York, State University of New York Press, 2004. 240 p.

11. Reznikova E.O. The Ancient Chinese System of Government (Based on the Treatises "Lun Yui" and "Mencius"). In *Youth of the 21st Century: A Step into the Future. Materials of the 22nd Regional Scientific and Practical Conference. Blagoveshchensk, May 20, 2021.* Blagoveshchensk, 2021, pp. 947–948. (In Russian). EDN: JQVVKH.

12. Radnaeva V.V. The Concept of "Soft Power" in Political Culture of China. *Evraziistvo i mir = Eurasianism and the World,* 2017, no. 1, pp. 76–86. (In Russian). EDN: BHQWBE.

13. Vasilevskaya V. Consolidation of Political Power in the Context of China's Cultural Values. *Vesnik Brehstskaga ўniversitehta. Seryya 1. Filasofiya. Palitalogiya. Satsyyalogiya = Vesnik of Brest University. Series 1. Philosophy. Politology. Sociology*, 2023, no. 1, pp. 60–67. (In Russian). EDN: MLGHCG.

14. Zhang S.N. *Confucianism in Contemporary Chinese Politics*. Lexington Books, 2015. 280 p.

15. Kong Q. Traditional Chinese Philosophical Model in the Context of Modern Antiterrorism Political Discourse in China. *Universitetskii Nauchnyi Zhurnal = Humanities and Science University Journal*, 2014, no. 7, pp. 102–108. (In Russian). EDN: SKEUMZ.

16. Kudryavceva N.A. Stages of Development of Confucianism and Chinese Philosophy in China. *Gumanitarnoe Prostranstvo = Humanity Space,* 2015, vol. 4, no. 5, pp. 876–883. (In Russian). EDN: VCJJPN.

17. Kushnir S. The Influence of Confucian Philosophy on the Formation of Modern Chinese Political Ideology. In *Science Today: Theory and Practice. Economic Sciences*, *Materials of the International Scientific and Practical Conference. Vologda, August 29, 2018*. Vologda, 2018, pp. 26–27. (In Russian). EDN: XZHPJR.

18. Wong D.B. Moral Sentimentalism in Early Confucian Thought. In Debes R., Stueber K.R. (eds). *Ethical Sentimentalism: New Perspectives.* Cambridge, 2017, pp. 210–229.

19. Wen H. *Chinese Philosophy. Chinese Political Philosophy, Metaphysics, Epistemology and Comparative Philosophy*. Beijing, China Intercontinental Press, 2010. 153 p.

20. Lau D.C. (ed.). *Mencius*. London, Penguin Books, 2004. 211 p.

21. Kline T.C., Philip J.I. (eds). *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2000. 296 p.

22. Hutton E.L. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. Princeton University Press, 2016. 248 p.

23. Cua A. Human Nature, Ritual, and History: Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy. *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, 2012, vol. 43. 406 p.

24. Hutton E.L. *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi*. Berlin, Springer, 2016. 588 p.
25. Peters M.A. Xi Jinping's Global Civilisation Initiative. *PESA Agora, 2023*. Available at: https://pesaagora.com/columns/xi-jinpings-global-civilisation-initiative/.

Информация об авторeах

Сун Ю — доктор наук по социальной коммуникации, доцент, факультет международных отношений, научный сотрудник Центра исследований Северо-Запада Азии, Даляньский университет иностранных языков, г. Далянь, Китайская Народная Республика, 46158747@qq.com.

Бикерниеце Анна — кандидат политических наук, старший преподаватель, факультет международных отношений, Даляньский университет иностранных языков, г. Далянь, Китайская Народная Республика, annaswan7733@gmail.com.

作者信息

孙钰 — 传播学博士, 副教授, 国际关系学院副教授, 东北亚研究中心研究员, 大连外国语大学, 大连市, 中华人民共和国, *46158747@qq.com.*

Anna Bikerniece — 政治学博士, 高级讲师, 国际关系学院, 大连外国语大学, 大连市, 中华人民共和国, *annaswan7733@gmail.com.*

Authors

Sun Yu — PhD in Communication, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Research Fellow, Center for Northeast Asia Research, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian, People's Republic of China, 46158747@qq.com.

Anna Bikerniece — PhD in Politics, Senior Lecturer, Department of International Relations, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian, People's Republic of China, annaswan7733@gmail.com.

Вклад авторов

Все авторы сделали эквивалентный вклад в подготовку публикации. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

作者的贡献

所有作者对该出版物的准备作出了等量贡献。所有作者声明无利益冲突。

Contribution of the Authors

The authors contributed equally to this article. The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Для цитирования

Сун Ю. Философия Мэн-цзы и Сюнь-цзы как наследие конфуцианства в сфере международной политики Китая / Сун Ю, А. Бикерниеце. — DOI 10.17150/2587-7445.2025.9(3).268-278. — EDN IKSITL // Российско-китайские исследования. — 2025. — Т. 9, № 3. — С. 268–278.

For Citation

Sun Yu, Bikerniece A. Mencius and Xunzi Philosophy as a Legacy of Confucianism in the Area of Chinese Foreign Policy. *Rossiisko-Kitaiskie Issledovaniya = Russian and Chinese Studies*, 2025, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 268–278. EDN: IKSITL. DOI: 10.17150/2587-7445.2025.9(3).268-278.