



## **BALTIC JOURNAL OF LAW & POLITICS**

A Journal of Vytautas Magnus University

VOLUME 15, NUMBER 2 (2022)

ISSN 2029-0454



Cite: *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 15:2 (2022): 1180-1190

DOI: 10.2478/bjlp-2022-001077

### **A Semiotic Analysis of Mind in Mencius' Doctrine in Ancient Chinese Philosophy**

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Received: August 21, 2022; reviews: 2; accepted: October 21, 2022.

#### **Abstract**

There is a common saying in academia that "mind" is the most common, basic and general category in the category system of ancient Chinese philosophy. Mind is an important part of Mencius' thoughts. Mencius constructed a relatively complete the theory of mind and was the first to combine mind with nature and presented the goodness of human nature. As Gorrée (1994) put it that without any human mind or non-human mind, there is no sign interpretation, and also there is no sign action, so there is no sign activity. In China, there are fewer study on Mencius' doctrine of mind from semiotic perspectives. Thus, this article aims to study the sign relation of the Chinese character 心 (xin, mind) into other signs so as to know about how it is used in the work Mencius, and to explore the meaning of the mind (心, xin) within Mencius' philosophical thought as well as to identify the sign transformation of mind-word-action so as to know about moral value of Mencius' theory and to discover the semioethic thoughts in Mencius' doctrine of mind. The statistic for the number of the Chinese character 心 (xin, mind) is 125 in the book Mencius. According to the sign relation of the Chinese character 心 (xin, mind) into other signs, they will be classified into six categories. Mind, word and action can transform into and educate each other reciprocally. Mind functions as the mediation between the transformation of word and action in the

dynamic sign activity since word and action cannot directly be transformed into each other. Mencius' doctrine of mind presents that we all subject to the responsibility and subject of the responsibility for life and for the other which demonstrates Chinese semioethic thoughts in politics, economics and education.

### **Keywords**

semiotics; mind (心, xin); Mencius

### **1. Introduction**

The development of modern western semiotics mainly has hitherto gone through three stages (Zhao, 2019, p. 14). The first stage is the first half of 20th century which is the stage of the formation and interpretation of the theories on semiotics. There exist two main origins in the modern west semiotics: one was in the United States, represented by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), and the other was in Europe, pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). The second stage occurs from 1960s to 1970s when semiotics developed vigorously as a theory. The feature of this stage is that Saussurean Semiology stands dominant. The third stage of western semiotics development originated from mid-1970s and was still unfolding. The characteristic of this stage is that Peirce's open model has replaced the Saussure's model.

Semioethics originated in the early 1980s and was proposed by Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio. Semioethics is not a branch of semiotics but a special direction of semiotic study. In 2003, the work *Semioetica* in Italian was published by Augusto Ponzio and Susan Petrilli with the expression "semioethics" in the title (Petrilli, 2019, p. 12). The recovery of the ethical-axiological dimension of semiosis is a vital task for the study of semiotics today (Petrilli, 2019, p. 68). Semioethics advocates to care for life, take responsibility for the other, and appeal to attach importance to the otherness and difference. Semioethics plays a great role of semiotic resisting force to adopt and comply with an unthinking and unreflective global communication production system made up of sameness and identity (Arnett, 2017; Didur et al., 2021). Human beings as the semiotic animals are capable of a global view of life and communication and competent to be responsible for semiosis and life (Deely, Petrilli & Ponzio, 2005; Deely 2010; Petrilli, 2019; Karnauh & Galaguzova, 2021; Mitsyuk & Pushkareva, 2021).

There is no word "sign" in ancient Chinese classical books, and there is no discipline called semiotics in ancient China. However, it cannot be said that there is no semiotic thought in ancient Chinese culture and philosophy. There are actually abundant semiotic thoughts in the documents handed down in China. The study on the signs has a history going back to the pre-Qin period. Philosophers from different schools formed the controversy around ming (名, name) and shi (实, entity) during the pre-Qin period, which is the peak stage of philosophical discussion on the issue of signs in the history of ancient Chinese philosophy.

Since the Song and Ming dynasties, the debate between ming (名, name) and shi (实, actuality) is no longer that hot. During this period, however, we can sort out the discussion of perception, sign and meaning from the close attitude to empirical facts that emerges from the Confucian tradition.

The Chinese term “fu hao xue” (符号学), which refers to the study on signs, was first presented by Zhao Yuanren in the article a long article named *Fu Hao Xue Da Gang* or *Outline of Symbolics* (《符号学大纲》) (as cited in Zhao, 2006, p. 92). Unfortunately, after Zhao Yuanren, the Chinese term “fu hao xue” disappeared in Chinese for several decades.

The reform and opening up brought an opportunity for the development of Chinese semiotics. Modern China has been specializing in semiotics for only about 40 years with the introduction of the western semiotics since 1980s (Yan & Zhang, 2010, p. 139). Compared with the west, although the study of semiotics in China started late, the study of semiotics in China is hot and catches up with the international trend quickly. The extremely abundant semiotic connotation exists within the Chinese traditional culture. Accordingly, the study of Chinese semiotics rooted in this cultural background shows its distinctive vitality from the very beginning of 1980s. In the light of Petrilli, what we have indicated as “semioethics” as a development on “global semiotics” (Petrilli, 2014, p. 32). As to Zhu Dong (2017, p. 70), the direct theoretical support on semioethics is “global semiotics” advocated by Sebeok, the Chinese semioethics, as a major source of semiotic thought, should not be absent in this “global” proposition.

Mencius’ doctrine of mind contains rich ethical thoughts, which attracts more attention from scholars at home and abroad. While there are fewer articles on the mind of Mencius’ doctrine from semiotic perspectives. Thus, this article will conduct the semiotic analysis of mind of Mencius’ doctrine in ancient Chinese philosophy. The qualitative research methods such as descriptive approach, and textual analysis will be employed. The objectives of the article covers three items: 1) to explore the sign relation of 心 (xin, mind) into other signs so as to know about how it is used in the work *Mencius* through extracting the Chinese character 心 (xin, mind) and to explore the meaning of the mind (心, xin) within Mencius’ philosophical thoughts; 2) to investigate the sign transformation of mind-word-action; 3) to discover the semioethic thoughts in Mencius’ doctrine of mind.

## **2. The Relation and Meaning of the Chinese Character 心 (Xin , Mind) and Other Signs**

In order to clarify the specific usage of the Chinese Character 心 (Xin, Mind) of the work *Mencius*, this article makes the statistics on the number of the Chinese character 心 (xin) in the book *Mencius*. The Chinese character 心 (xin) appeared 125 times including the character 心 (xin) used in the article titles of the book *Mencius*. Given the sign relations of the Chinese character 心 (xin, mind) into other signs, they are classified into 6 categories as follows: 1) verb+心 (xin, mind) which appears 27 times such as 尽心 (jinxin, put one’s mind and soul into), 用心 (yongxin,

pay attention to), 有心 (youxin, set one's mind on), etc.; 2) pronoun+心 (xin, mind) which appears 37 times such as 吾心 (wuxin, my mind), 其心 (qixin, one's mind), etc.; 3) the structural auxiliary word “之” (zhi)+心 (xin, mind) which appears 26 times, for example 惻隱之心 (ceyin zhi xin, the mind of commiseration and 辭讓之心 (ci rang zhi xin, the mind of modesty and yielding; 4) adjective+心 (xin, mind) which appears 7 times for instance 良心 (liangxin, the proper goodness of mind); 5) 心 (xin, mind) stands alone as a single word which appears 25 times; 6) the Chinese word 心 (xin, mind) used in the name of a man for 3 times for example 孔距心 (Kong Juxin).

Table 1 The Classification of the Chinese Character 心 (Xin, Mind) According to the Sign Relation to Other signs

Categories	Total Number
verb+心 (xin, mind)	27
pronoun+心 (xin, mind)	37
the structural auxiliary word “之” (zhi)+心 (xin, mind)	26
adjective+心 (xin, mind)	7
心 (xin, mind) stands alone as a single word	25
心 (xin, mind) used in a man's name	3

According to the sign relations of the sign relations of the Chinese character mind 心 (Xin, Mind) into other signs, the Chinese characters 心 (xin, mind) can be classified into six categories. There are a lot of explanations on mind in *Mencius*, this article summarizes the meanings of the mind into 2 types including the mind of the morality, and the mind of cognition. As mentioned above, given the sign relations of the Chinese character 心 (xin, mind) into other signs, there exist 6 categories. Item 3 and item 4 refer to the mind of morality, and item 1, item 2, and item 5 are involved in the mind of cognition. In item 6, character 心 is used in a man's name and it is not involved in the mind of Mencius' doctrine. Therefore, it is not further explained here. The meanings of the mind of morality and the mind of cognition will be explained as follows:

### A. The Mind of Morality

The mind of the morality refers to the mind of moral emotion and moral consciousness, which takes human-heartedness or benevolence (仁, ren), righteousness (义, yi), propriety (礼, li) and wisdom (智, zhi) as the core content. According to Confucius, he talked about very much about human-heartedness or benevolence (仁, ren). Everyone should “extend himself to include the other” which is the practice of human-heartedness or benevolence (仁, ren). But Confucius failed to explain why it is that a man should act in this way. Mencius tried to answer this question and connected mind and human nature together and developed the original goodness of human nature. Mencius. To support his theory, in chapter 6 of *Gaozi I of Mencius*, Mencius said “the mind of commiseration is shared by everyone, so is that of shame and dislike; that of modesty and yielding; that of right and wrong. The mind of commiseration refers to the beginning of human-heartedness

or benevolence (仁, ren). The mind of shame and dislike refers to the beginning of righteousness (义, yi). The mind of modesty and yielding refers to the beginning of propriety (礼, li). The mind of right and wrong refers to the beginning of wisdom (智, zhi).” Actually, the mind of commiseration, the mind of shame and dislike, the mind of modesty and yielding as well as the mind of right and wrong, which were presented by Mencius, all have the elements of moral emotions and moral consciousness as good elements in human nature. Mencius harbored that they were all moral emotions from the nature of human beings, and they were belonging to a kind of moral instinct which reflected the inherent goodness of human beings.

In the work *Mencius*, there are a lot of places where mind (心, xin) is used to refer to moral emotion and moral consciousness. As Mencius put it in Chapter 12 of *Li Lou II*, “The great man is one who never loses the pure mind of an innocent child.” In Chapter 28 of *Li Lou II*, Mencius presented “A superior man is different from other men since that which he keeps in mind is different from others.” Mencius thought that the moral emotions and moral consciousness are latent in human nature.

## B. The Mind of Cognition

The mind of the cognition refers not only to the brain, the material carrier of mental activities, but also to the mental activities and the spiritual life. Mencius treated the mind of right and wrong as the beginning of wisdom (智, zhi) which means wisdom (智, zhi) is considered as the innate ability of human beings to recognize and judge right and wrong. Wisdom (智, zhi) refers to the mind of thinking, namely, the ability to judge right and wrong in people’s mind. Through wisdom (智, zhi), people can make moral value judgements about right and wrong and then make moral behavior judgements about whether to do something or not. In Chapter 15 of *Gaozi I*, Mencius replied to the disciple Gong Du, “The function of the eye and the ear is not to think, and the senses of hearing and seeing are obscured by external things. When an external thing comes into contact with them, it simply leads them on. To the mind belongs the office of thinking. Thinking is helpful to obtain the right viewpoint of things but ignoring to think leads to the failure of getting the right view.” Mencius believed that there was only one way, i.e., self-examination and self-reflection to prove the proper goodness of mind and the innate mind. In Chapter 3 of *King Hui of Liang I*, King Hui of Liang said, “In the government of the kingdom, I do indeed exert my mind to the utmost... On the examining the government of the neighboring kingdoms, I do not find that there is any prince who put to use mind as I do.” In Chapter 4 of *Teng Wen Gong I*, Mencius pointed out “Those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with strength are governed by others.” Two phrases 尽心 (jinxin, exert the mind) and 用心 (yongxin, put to use the mind) mentioned by the King Liang of Hui coupled with the phrase 劳心 (laoxin, labor with mind) all refer to the mind of mental activities, emphasizing the subjective initiative of the mind.

Mencius believed that people could play the subjective initiative of the mind

and can take the initiative to recognize the good beginnings latent in the nature so that the mind is not obscured by the external things. Through the mind of cognition to make the self-reflection and self-examination, people can prove the innate of mind and the proper goodness of mind, judge the word and action, and make the timely correction and repair, so as to make the word and the action more in line with the requirement of the proper goodness of mind.

### 3. Transformation of the Mind-Word-Action

The mind in Mencius' doctrine does not only emphasize morality and cognition, but also the practice. The mind in Mencius' doctrine transcends the empirical realm and also points to the empirical realm. Tang Yijie (2008, p. 80) said, "For Mencius, all human beings in their innate nature possess the 'four beginnings' which refer to the four minds including the mind of commiseration, of shame and dislike, of modesty and yielding, of right and wrong, which can be transformed into the 'four constant virtues' covering human-heartedness or benevolence (仁, ren), righteousness (义, yi), propriety (礼, li) and wisdom (智, zhi) if they are fully developed. The formation of the 'four constant virtues' depends on the moral practice of the human beings as sign subjects." As Mencius mentioned, "As all human beings possess the four beginnings in themselves, let them to understand how to give them full development and completion. The outcome will be like fire that begins to burn, or a spring which has begun to find vent. Let them have their complete development, and they will suffice to protect all within the four seas. If they are denied that development, they will not suffice even to one's parents." The goodness of mind has to put into practice to make sense.

From Mencius' doctrine of mind, the goodness is not limited in the goodness of mind which mean the goodness of mind does not stay still, but the synthesis of the good mind, the good word and the good action in the dynamic process. These three can transform into each other. The mind has a triadic relation to the word and to the action shown as follows:

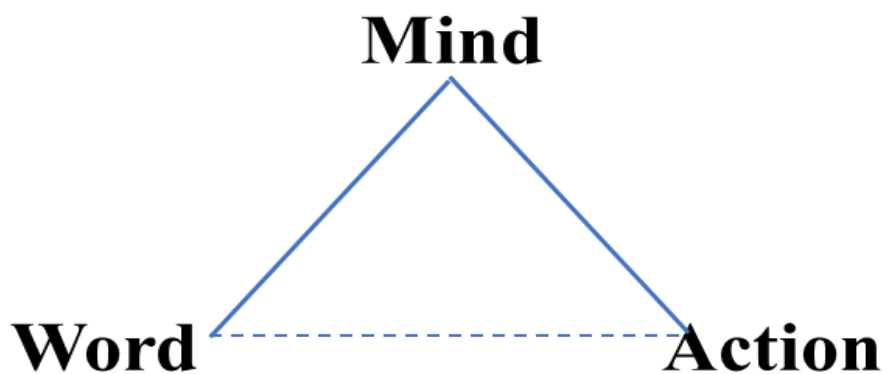


Figure 2 *The Sign Transformation Relation of Mind-Word-Action*

In the Mencius' doctrine of mind, the mind as a sign, which is the intangible sign could be transformed into word or/and action which are the tangible signs and the goodness of mind is transformed into the goodness of word and action, and vice versa. The goodness of mind (intangible sign) is transformed into the good word (tangible sign), and the good word helps the semiotic subject deliver the goodness to and learn from the other in the process of communication and meanwhile transforms the goodness of mind from self and what they learn from the other into relatively fixed and systematic concept and knowledge by induction and simultaneously the mind of cognition recognizes and judges the right and wrong on the concept and knowledge, so as to promote the complete development of four minds into the four virtues. Every increase in mind information involves and is involved by a corresponding increase in word information.

Peirce et al. (1998, p. 43) mentioned that "the whole function of thought from mind is to produce habits of action." As summarized by Kent (1987, p. 197), Peirce stated it clear that "an endless series of signs, which never get realized in action but are translated into nothing but signs, would not show any growth". Mencius said in Chapter 6 of *Gong Sun Chou I*, "Let them have their complete development, and they will suffice to protect all within the four seas."

The goodness of mind (the intangible signs) is expanded to guide good actions (the tangible signs). Parents' good actions set a good example for their children. The good actions of officials set an example to the people. Children and people follow suit, thus strengthening the goodness of mind. The mind of morality has got the consolidation and then contributes to the formation of good social norms. The concept and knowledge from mind can be transformed into the actions. Test the previous concept, knowledge, and goodness from mind with the actions and promote the construction of the true knowledge and good social moral norms. The construction of true knowledge and good social moral norms also standardizes human actions, thus forming an excellent tradition of handling the relationship between mind and action in traditional Chinese moral cultivation.

For Mencius, the goodness of mind (intangible sign) functions as producing the good actions (tangible sign) which means the good action (tangible sign) is the practice of the goodness of mind (intangible sign) and in turns promotes the complete development of the good mind (intangible sign). According to Mencius, word and action are usually regarded as interdependent and closely related categories of unity of opposites. There exists a reason for this. People's mind dominates people's various behaviors and activities, and words and actions, as two external manifestations of people's mind, are both different and related, and naturally have the relationship of unity of opposites. The word (tangible sign) and the action (tangible sign) all are the interpretation and deduction of mind. People's word (tangible sign) and action (tangible sign) need to match each other, that is, the word (tangible sign) should be consistent with the action (tangible sign) and the action (tangible sign) should be same as the word (tangible sign) which is calculated to express. As for Mencius, the action (tangible sign) needs to be



described in the word; word must be carried out by relevant action. Only word and action are appropriate to each other can we call ourselves the gentleman.

The word (the tangible sign) can be transformed into the action (tangible sign) and the goodness of word is transformed into the goodness of actions, and vice versa, which requires the help and the domination of mind. The sign transformation of word and action cannot lie in without mind. Mind mediates the word and the action. Mind, word and action educate reciprocally.

#### **4. Mencius' Doctrine of Mind: A Semioethic Perspective**

Mencius interpreted and communicated the doctrine of mind to the kings and his disciples through dialogues in which the goodness of mind is transformed into the good word to involve with the other, care for the other and be not indifferent to the other, meanwhile the good word will be transformed into the good action of self and the other. Mencius' doctrine of mind presents that we all subject to the responsibility and subject of the responsibility for life and for the other which demonstrate Chinese semioethic thoughts in politics, economics and education. Mencius proposed, "Treat your elders with the respect and reverence and extend the respect and reverence to the other's elders; treat the young of your own with kindness and love and extend the kindness and love to the young of the other." The practice of "the mind of commiseration" dwells in consideration and care for the other in Confucianism.

Mencius proposed in Chapter 14 of *Jin Xin Part II* in *Mencius*, "The people occupy the most important position in a state, the gods of land and grain stay the next, and the lightest is the sovereign." In Mencius' political ideas, people are the most important in the three elements covering sovereign, state and people. Mencius admonished that King Jie (c. 1654-1600 BCE) and King Zhou of Shang dynasty (c. 1105- 1046 BCE) lost their thrones as they lost the people. Losing people refers to losing people's mind and losing people's mind means to lose the mind of following the King or officials. There is a way to make a kingdom harmonious: win the people and the kingdom will well governed. There is a means to make the people follow the sovereign or the officials: win the people's mind and the people's supports will be gotten. There is a means to obtain people's mind: supply what the people like and never impose upon them what the people dislike. The people are absolutely willing to turn to a state which carries out the benevolent policy and a benevolent sovereign. That's to say where there is a benevolent sovereign there is a policy benefiting and caring for the people and where there is a policy which benefits the people, there is a peaceful and tranquil state in which the sovereign cares for life and takes responsible for the other, he can win over the people's mind.

As for education, when Duke Wen of Teng asked Mencius for advice on statecraft, Mencius presented "Establish the educational institutions covering Xiang (庠), Xu (序), Xue (学) and Jiao (校) for educating the people." Mencius promoted that the superior man could enjoy joy from three things and considered the



instructing and educating the talented people and promising them as the one delight of three things. Confucius called for the teaching method "teaching in accordance with students' different aptitudes" which Mencius agreed with and put forward that the superior man had five ways to offer his instruction: to influence the students like timely rain; to help some make the virtue perfect; to help some develop their talents; to answer their questions and resolve their doubts; to leave the influences and good examples for some to cultivate privately and correct themselves. It is five ways mentioned by Mencius that the superior applied to instruct and educate students. For Mencius, there is no fixed teaching method, teacher should attend to the otherness and difference of the students and adopt the different methods in accordance to the students' different aptitudes and different needs.

Arnett indicated that as to Petrilli, the semiotic ethical dimension of semiosis leans on dialogue and the infinite possibilities of otherness and difference (Arnett, 2017, p. 80). Through the book *Mencius*, it is not difficult to find that Mencius promoted the doctrine of mind in dialogue in which Mencius necessitated the attention to otherness and difference and attended to care for life and take responsibilities for the other.

## **5. Conclusion**

The ancient Chinese semioethics reached the peak during the period of pre-Qin dynasty, which lays a foundation for the unification of the semiotic ethical thoughts of ancient China and renders the important theoretical reference value for the research and development of modern semioethics. As semioethics, semiotics is committed to maintaining the health of semiosis over the global and improving the quality of life on a global scale, which refers to cultivate the ability of listening and understanding oriented by the humanistic spirit of otherness at the intersection of sign theory and axiology, ethics, and pragmatism. As an animal in the sense of semiotics, the human being is able to recognize and use signs, functions as the mediation between the signs, and reflects on the semiosis globally (Petrilli, 2019, p. 17). Semiotics is associated with responsibility. The human being as a semiotic animal is the subject of responsibility and are constrained by the responsibility (Petrilli, 2019, p. 22). Human beings should bear the responsibility of caring for the other.

This article deals with the semiotic analysis of mind in Mencius' doctrine. Mencius strictly restricted the minds related to the goodness of nature to morality. The four minds covering the mind of commiseration, of the shame and dislike, of modesty and yielding, of right and wrong refer to the four beginnings of human-heartedness or human-heartedness or benevolence (仁, ren), righteousness (义, yi), propriety (礼, li) and wisdom (智, zhi). The four minds are treated as the four beginnings. Mencius advocated in Chapter 6 of *Gong Sun Chou II*, "All human beings have such four beginnings as they have the four limbs. If human beings, possessing the four minds as four beginnings, say they cannot develop them, they

play the thief with themselves. Because all human beings have the four minds, let them understand to provide them with the complete development, and the issue will be like that of fire which has begun to burn, or that of a spring which has begun to find vent. Let them have their development and completion, and they will suffice to love and protect all in the four seas. Let them be denied that development, and they will not suffice for a man to serve his parents with." That means the development and completion of the four minds can contribute to the family harmony and social harmony and stability.

The development and completion of the four minds is inseparable from the moral practice of human being as the semiotic subjects in the sign transformation process of mind-word-action. For Mencius, the mind of cognition is the internal integrity that constrains one's individual behavior and people can give play to the initiative of the cognitive mind to recognize the right and wrong so that mind is not blinded.

The mind in Mencius' doctrine does not only emphasize morality and cognition, but also the practice. From Mencius' doctrine of mind, the goodness is not limited in the goodness of mind which mean the goodness of mind does not stay still, but the synthesis of the good mind, the good word and the good action in the dynamic process.

Mencius' doctrine of mind necessitates attention to the otherness and attends to care for life and care for the other which demonstrates a lot of ethical semiotic thoughts and has a profound impact on politics, economics and education.

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