

ANCIENT SAGES OF CHINA

# MENCIUS

A Benevolent Saint for the Ages

By Xu Yuanxiang & Zhang Bing

| CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS |



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## Mencius--A Benevolent Saint for the Ages

### Introduction

Some 2,400 years ago in China, an ordinary man journeyed to the imperial palace where the king lived. This man was sufficiently bold to dare to rebuke the king for his mistakes. He fearlessly informed the king that if he was not qualified to rule, he should step down and make way for a better king. He even confidently advanced his own theory of government: "The people are the most important element

Front gate of the Mencius Mension.







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in a state; next come the gods of land and grain; least of all is the ruler himself.” This was undoubtedly the first Chinese expression of a theory of democratic administration. For an ordinary person to advance these progressive ideas and to criticize the behaviour of an all-powerful monarch was at this time to risk his life.

In the two millennia that have passed since this man lived, his thoughts and ideas have continued to have a major influence on the Chinese people. Even today, people can be regularly heard to quote the sayings of this man. This brave



Statue of Mencius  
(372 BC-289 BC).





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Statue of Socrates (469 BC-399 BC).



Statue of Plato (427 BC-347 BC).

and intelligent person is known to history as Mencius—a benevolent saint for the ages.

In the 5th century BC, two of the greatest thinkers in the history of western civilization—Socrates and Plato—were born in the lands of the Greek archipelago. Amazingly, in the same century, two of the most renowned philosophers of eastern civilization—Confucius and Mencius—were born in the lands that are now known as China. Confucius is well known in the west, but most westerners are unfamiliar with Mencius and not many have even heard of him. In contrast,





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Hometown of Mencius in Zou County in Shandong Province.





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in China, Mencius is regarded with just as much respect and reverence as is Confucius.

## Childhood

In an early morning in 372 BC, a baby was born to a noble family of the aristocratic name of “Meng,” who had fallen on hard times. The most illustrious of the Meng ancestors had been appointed as prime minister of the State of Lu. However, when the baby was born, the family was in straitened circumstances and the whole family had to move from the prosperous capital to a small remote city so as to reduce their living expenses. Obviously, the birth of that baby added much to the financial burdens of the hard-pressed family.

The baby was named Ke, which had the same pronunciation as a Chinese character which means frustration. It was a custom with people in ancient China to use a character identical in pronunciation to a character they wanted to denote when naming a child. So while they didn’t want to name their child “Frustration,” they nevertheless wished him to remember the difficulties of the life the family was facing when the boy entered the world. They could never have predicted just how much frustration this baby would, in fact,







Ruins of the city walls of the  
State of Lu.







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have to face during the course of his life; nor indeed could they possibly have foreseen that this baby would become one of the most famous figures in all of Chinese culture and civilization whose thoughts would influence countless generations of Chinese people.

Though the Meng family's circumstances at that time were not auspicious, they never neglected an age-old family tradition—that of providing their sons with a good education. Clever and warm-hearted, Mencius' mother

The temple was built to mark Mencius' mother who moved their home three times for a better neighborhood.







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could never countenance the possibility that her son should grow up illiterate. Indeed when she was pregnant with Mencius, she often recited the famous *Book of Poetry* (Songs and Odes) to her belly eager to begin cultivating the literary sensibilities of the baby lying within.

Today, practically all Chinese have heard the story of *Mencius's Mother Moves Three Times*.

The Meng's used to live on the outskirts of a city with a large graveyard where children without education always hung around. Influenced by these children, Mencius became one of them, regularly becoming involved in fistfights and various kinds of trouble. Concerned at the influence of these uncouth ruffians, Mencius' mother decided to move to a more respectable area of the city believing that this was in the best interests of her son's proper development. This was the first occasion the family moved.



New Year's painting created to tell the story of Mencius' mother who moved their home three times for a better neighborhood.





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A bazaar during the Warring States Period (475 BC-221 BC).

Eventually Mencius' mother chose as their new home a house beside a bazaar where people traded and negotiated and the peddler's cries carried on the fragrant summer air. Here, the ever-curious Mencius learned the tricks of the merchant, hawking and haggling and hoodwinking like the pedlars who festooned the market stalls. Merchants at that time enjoyed nothing like the status they have today—the once noble Meng family would have especially despised such a trade—so Mencius' mother was understandably concerned once again about the suitability of this environment for her





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son's growth and development. It was clearly time for the family to move again.

Their third home was in the neighborhood of a place called the Palace of Education—perhaps quite similar in its day to the position that Peking University holds in our own day. Namely. It was a place where intellectuals gathered and people of cultivation and breeding discussed the issues of the day. Mencius eagerly learned the importance of rites and

Ruins of the Palace of Education in Changyuan County, Henan Province. Confucius was said to have lectured in the palace.







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the imperatives of politeness and soon he was bowing and scraping whenever coming in and going out of even his own home. His mother sighed with great relief. At last she felt she had found the ideal environment for her son. The family settled down.

The ancient building of the Palace of Education was tranquil and solemn with often the only sound the restful drone of students reading aloud from their textbooks. Teachers and students were often to be seen practicing rites and when important festivals

*Mencius' mother Taking Great Care of Teaching Her Son* by Kang Tao (Qing Dynasty, 1616-1911).