

RESEARCH TRENDS AND HOTSPOTS IN MENCIUS STUDIES: A VISUAL ANALYSIS BASED ON VOS VIEWER

TIANYING ZHANG & HUICHAN REN

Aba Teachers College

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2025.8317>

ABSTRACT

This study investigates trends and hotspots in Mencius research, primarily aiming to uncover the significant role and influence of Mencius within the realm of Chinese Confucian scholarship while offering insights into the directions and focal points of Mencius studies. Employing VOSviewer 1.6.20 and Excel software, the research utilizes bibliometric analysis to provide a comprehensive depiction of the academic domain of Mencius studies. Key findings indicate the notable contributions of scholars such as Wang Y, Zhang X, and Li Y. The main research themes encompass Mencius, human nature theory, benevolence, reason, and the Mencius. Additionally, the study identifies current interests in benevolent governance, the Mencius, the Great Learning, Wang Yangming, and the Confucian orthodoxy, which are anticipated to steer the future research trajectory in the field of Mencius studies. This research will enhance readers' understanding of Mencius and the importance of his ideas within the Confucian academic framework. Through a systematic analysis of the current status and trends in Mencius studies, it will effectively promote the advancement and innovation of Mencius research.

Keywords: Mencius, Visual Analysis, VOSviewer, Trend, Research Hotspot

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mencius is a pivotal representative of the Confucian school, revered as the Second Sage, second only to Confucius in stature. He inherited and developed Confucius' philosophy of benevolence, proposing the theories of human nature being good and benevolent governance, emphasizing the importance of people-centric thought and moral cultivation. At the core of Mencius' philosophical system lies his belief in the inherent goodness of human nature, asserting the dignity and value of human character, and the conviction that humans are innately endowed with a deep-seated instinct for goodness, making it one of the most influential concepts in the history of Chinese philosophy (Wang, 2025; Wang, 2024). In the exercise of political power, Mencius advocates for benevolent governance, highlighting the significance of the will of the people. His ideas on benevolent governance are a culmination of the ancient statesmanship of the Three Dynasties, painting a grand blueprint for the governance of a unified realm (Yao, 2024; Wei, 2023). The book Mencius is also one of the Four Books of Confucianism, becoming a classic in the tradition. His thoughts have had a profound impact on the development of Confucian thought in later generations.

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

VOSviewer is a tool designed for the comprehensive examination of clustering solutions, leveraging visualization techniques (Hassan-Montero et al., 2022; Ren & Abdullah, 2024). Excel software serves as a powerful visualization tool capable of instantly creating maps based on input data (Au & Rischpater, 2015). This study primarily employed VOSviewer 1.6.20 and Excel software for bibliometric analysis and the generation of a literature knowledge map.

The research data for this study were collected from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). The selection criteria for the research data included the following: topic (Mencius) and publication year (2021-2025). The researchers conducted an advanced search on CNKI and obtained a total of 802 documents. After manually screening out documents with missing authors, as well as news and informational literature, a total of 795 documents remained. These documents were specifically selected for thorough visualization and analysis.

3.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Publication Volume Trend Analysis

Figure 1 displays the publication volume of literature related to Mencius. Apart from exceeding 200 publications in 2021, the annual publication count from 2022 to 2025 all remained below 200. The number of publications does not exhibit an exciting upward trend. Meanwhile, the publication count showed a continuous upward trend until 2024, after which it declined. This suggests that the activity level of academic research on Mencius is not particularly high.

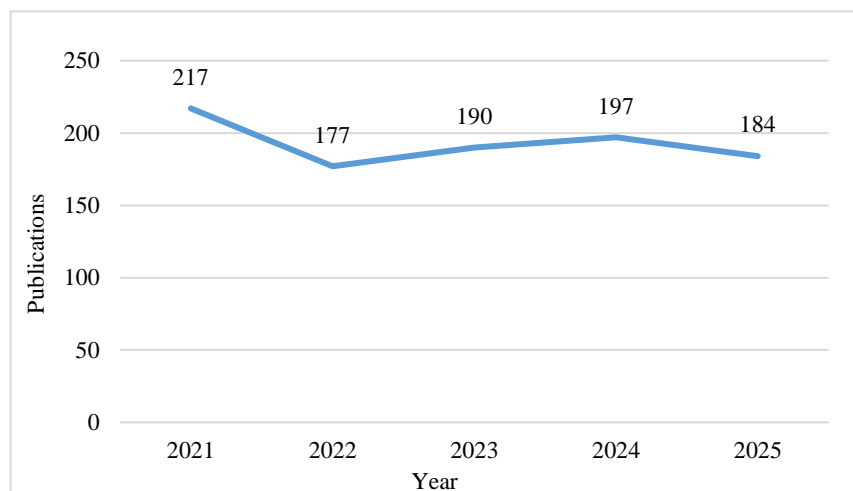


Figure 1: Annual Distribution of Mencius' Thought Research

3.2 Prolific Authors Analysis

Figure 2 reveals the authors who have made significant contributions to the field of Mencius studies, having published five or more papers. Scholars Yang Zebo and Yang Haiwen have, to date, published 14 papers related to the topic of Mencius. Le Aiguo has produced a total of 11 related publications, while Huang Yushun has contributed 8 relevant papers. Shen Shunfu has published 7 papers, and Zhao Fasheng has contributed 6 papers. Xiang Shiling, Xu Jiaxing, Zhu Hanmin, and Wu Tianming have each published 5 papers. Therefore, Yang Zebo, Yang Haiwen, and Le Aiguo have shown a strong interest in the study of Mencius, indicating that

they likely possess specialized knowledge in this research area and have made substantial contributions to the field.

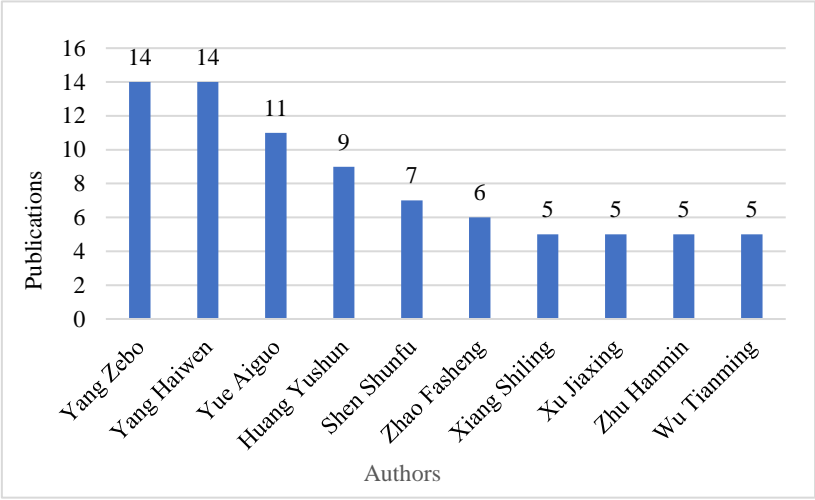


Figure 2: Authors and Contributions to Mencius' Thought Research

Figure 3 illustrates a close connection between scholar Yang Zebo, Wang Keyou, and Hou Jian; however, the overall ties among the authors are not well-defined strong. Scholars can enhance their communication and collaboration with other authors in future research. Interdisciplinary and cross-domain multi-author collaborations may generate diverse academic perspectives, bringing innovation to the subject matter and infusing fresh ideas into academic research.



Figure 3: Author Co-occurrence Network

3.3 Analysis of High-Contribution Institutions

Figure 4 shows the performance of various universities within the high-contribution institutions. The data show that Shandong University leads the list with 51 publications, establishing itself as an academic powerhouse in Mencius studies. Following closely are Renmin University of China with 38 papers and Sun Yat-sen University with 37 papers. Fudan University, Peking University, and Beijing Normal University have published 36, 34, and 33 papers, respectively. East China Normal University, Tsinghua University, Wuhan University,

and Sichuan University also have notable publication counts, with 27, 22, 18, and 17 papers, respectively. These figures reflect the level of activity and influence of each university in the field of Mencius research and scholarly output.

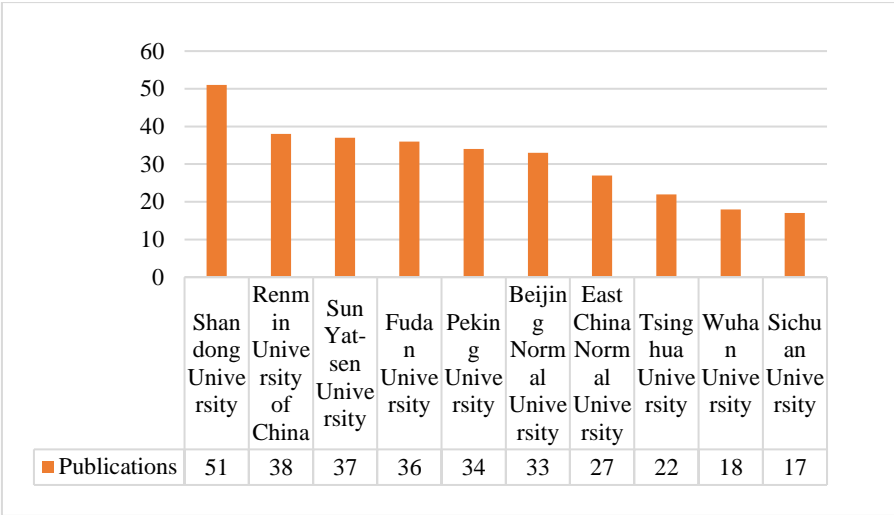


Figure 4: High-Contribution Institutions

3.4 Analysis of High-Contribution Journals

Figure 5 highlights the high-contribution journals. Confucius Studies leads the field with 58 published papers, establishing itself as one of the most influential journals in the discipline. The history of Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Studies follows, with publication counts of 44 and 30 papers, respectively ranking second and third. Subsequently, journals such as Qilu Journal, Zhongzhou Academic Journal, and Philosophical Dynamics have seen decreasing publication counts but still maintain a significant level of academic contribution. Additionally, journals like Morality and Civility, Confucius School, and Literature, History, and Academia have also demonstrated a stable academic influence within their respective domains. Overall, these journals collectively form a diverse academic platform that promotes the development and progress of related disciplines.

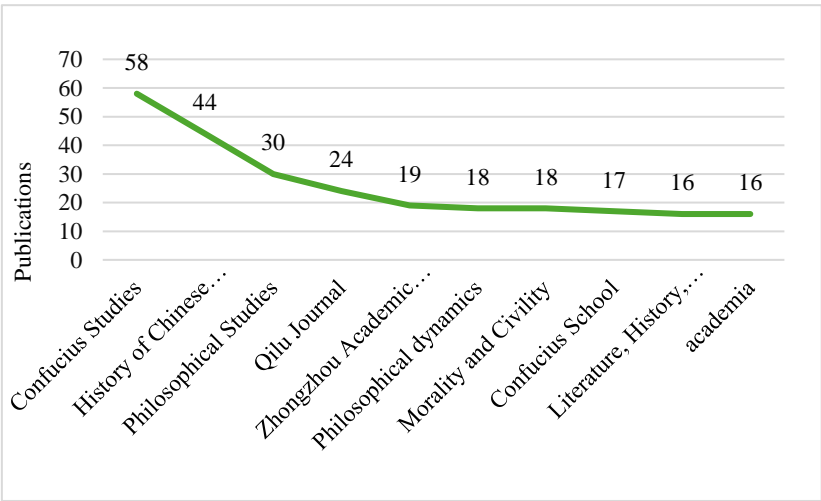


Figure 5: High-Contribution Journals**3.5 Keywords Co-occurrence Analysis**

Figure 6 presents the co-occurrence network of keywords in Mencius studies. The researchers set the minimum co-occurrence count for keywords at seven times, resulting in 42 eligible keywords, and after removing duplicates, a final set of 32 valid keywords was obtained. Figure 5 displays five different clusters, each identified by a distinct color. Cluster 1, marked in red, contains eight items and focuses on Confucian thought and its political philosophy. The most important keywords are Mencius (total line strength = 98, occurrences = 129), Confucius (total line strength = 39, occurrences = 33), and benevolent government (total line strength = 16, occurrences = 10). The green Cluster 2 contains six items, primarily investigating Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and its philosophy of mind and nature. The "Mencius" (total line strength = 9, occurrences = 32) is the most significant keyword, followed by Zhu Xi (total line strength = 19, occurrences = 20), and Wang Yangming (total line strength = 13, occurrences = 12). Cluster 3, marked in blue, includes six items and focuses on Confucian ethics and political philosophy, with benevolence (total line strength = 18, occurrences = 19), the kingly way (total line strength = 12, occurrences = 10), and righteousness (total line strength = 10, occurrences = 11) as the main keywords. Cluster 4, marked in yellow, also contains six items and explores the ethics and cosmological philosophy of Pre-Qin Confucianism, with key terms such as principle (total line strength = 10, occurrences = 11), goodness (total line strength = 7, occurrences = 8), and Dai Zhen (total line strength = 6, occurrences = 11). Cluster 5, marked in purple, includes six items and focuses on Confucian theories of human nature and ethical-moral philosophy, with Xunzi (total line strength = 61, occurrences = 50) as the most significant keyword, followed by the theory of human nature being good (total line strength = 16, occurrences = 19), and the theory of human nature (total line strength = 15, occurrences = 19). The research directions provide a coherent and effective framework for understanding the unique contributions of each cluster within the field of Mencius studies.

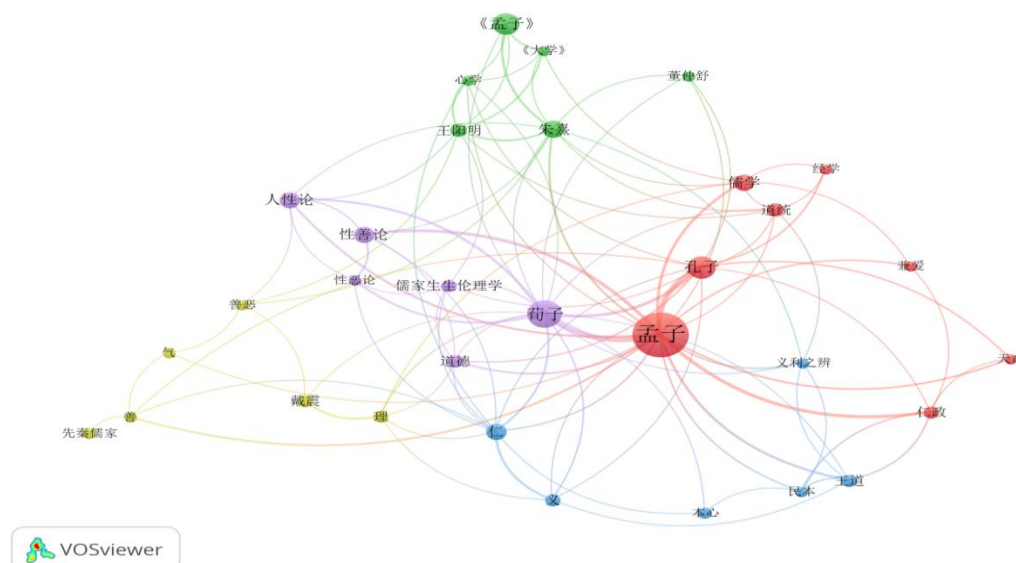


Figure 7 displays the co-occurrence overlay network of Mencius studies. By utilizing the overlay network, the researchers identified five terms that have recently gained popularity: benevolent government (occurrences = 10, average publication year: 2023.20), the Mencius (occurrences = 32, average publication year: 2023.03), The Great Learning (occurrences = 7, average publication year: 2023.14), Wang Yangming (occurrences = 12, average publication year: 2023.08), and the transmission of the Way (occurrences = 12, average publication year: 2023.00). Based on the analysis of the latest popular keywords presented in Figure 7, it can be inferred that the current focus areas of Mencius research are centered on the themes of benevolent government, The Mencius, The Great Learning, Wang Yangming, and the transmission of the Way. These themes are expected to emerge as prominent trends in research over the next few years.

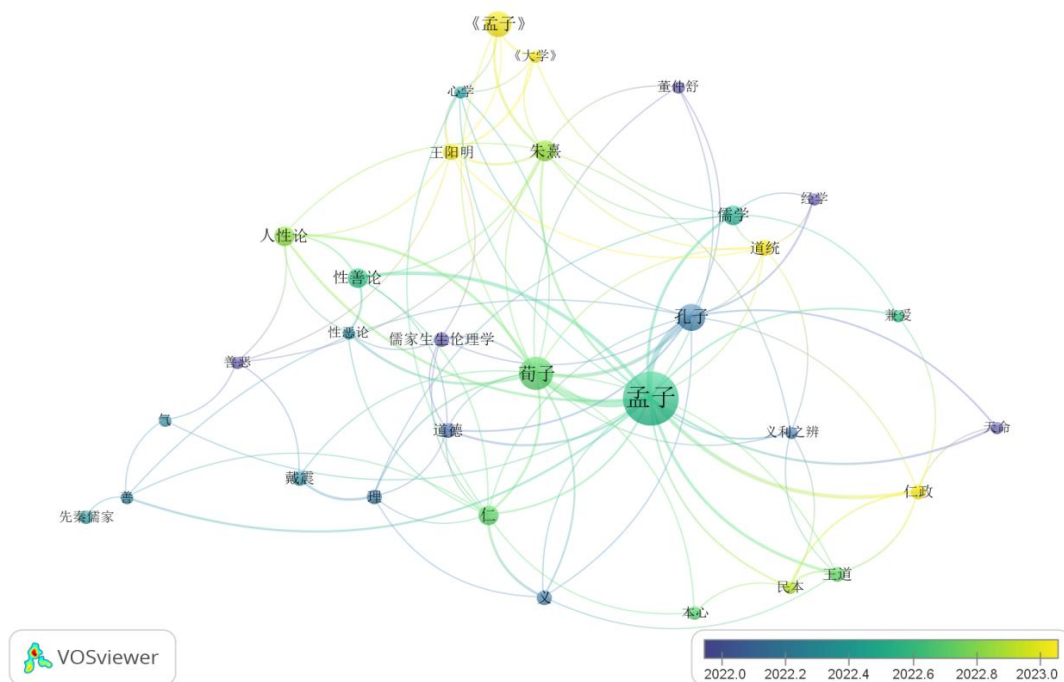


Figure 7: Keyword Co-occurrence in the Network of Mencius' Thought Research

The academic community has made substantial contributions to Mencius studies, with Shandong University's input being particularly notable. This underscores the significant position and influence of Mencius in Chinese Confucian academia. The concept of benevolent government in Mencius' thought is supported by the data. Scholars in Mencius studies have focused their attention on five main themes: Mencius, the theory of human nature, benevolence, reason, and the Mencius. However, the current hotspots focus on benevolent government, the Mencius, the Great Learning, Wang Yangming, and the transmission of the Way in Mencius

research is expected to shape future research directions. This comprehensive analysis offers valuable insights into the dynamic development of Mencius studies.

Although our assessment of the current state of Mencius studies is considered accurate, it is necessary to acknowledge that relying solely on CNKI for data collection may limit the scope of our research. In subsequent stages, researchers should be encouraged to enhance their capabilities in this area to ensure a more comprehensive analysis can be conducted.

5.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers thank Dong Zhongshu and the Traditional Culture Research Center at Hengshui University for their assistance.

6.0 FUNDING

This study is funded by Key Research Bases of Humanities and Social Sciences in Higher Educational Institutions in Hebei (Reference Code: JD2413) and the 2024 Research Project on Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture of Shandong Youth Education Science Research Institute (Reference Code: 24SCT129).

7.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Tianying Zhang, as the first author, made the following contributions to this study: conceptualization and research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation, drafting the manuscript, and critically revising it for substantive intellectual content. As the corresponding author, she oversaw all correspondence with the journal throughout the submission, peer review, and publication processes.

Huichan Ren, as a co-author, made substantial contributions to this study through data analysis and interpretation, as well as critical review of the manuscript for significant intellectual content. Both authors have approved the final version to be published and take full responsibility for all aspects of the work, including investigation and resolution of any issues related to research accuracy and academic integrity.

REFERENCES

- Wang, K. (2025). New Reflections on the "Conscience Debate" – Insights and Evidence from Mirror Neuron Theory. *Philosophical Dynamics*, (2), 50-59.
- Yao, Y. (2024). Mencius on the Moral Foundation of Political Power – A Theoretical Perspective Based on the Distinction Between Legitimacy and Justification. *Journal of Lanzhou University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 52(5), 88-97.
- Wang, C. X. (2024). The Role of Mencius' Thought on Human Nature in the Development of Benevolent Government. *Ancient and Modern Creation*, (28), 58-60.

- Wei, Y. H. (2023). Mencius' "Benevolent Government": The Culmination of Ancient Stateless Society's Thoughts on State Governance. *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, (4), 182-192.
- Ren, H., & Abdullah, S. (2024b). Mapping agroecosystems in BRICS nations: A comprehensive bibliometric and visualization analysis. *Journal of Biotech Research*, 17, 187-195
- Au, C., & Rischpater, R. (2015). Microsoft Mapping: Geospatial Development in Windows 10 with Bing Maps and C. In *Power Map for Excel* (pp. 159–165). Apress.
- Hassan-Montero, Y., De-Moya-Anegón, F., & Guerrero-Bote, V. P. (2022). SCImago Graphica: A new tool for exploring and visually communicating data. *Profesional de La Información / Information Professional*, 31(5), 1-12.