

# Chapter 3

## Mencius in the Han Dynasty



Paul R. Goldin

### 1 Introduction

Because the recension of the *Mencius* by ZHAO Qi 趙岐 (d. A.D. 201) supplanted everything that preceded it, today one can only guess at the nature of earlier editions. SIMA Qian 司馬遷 (145?-86? B.C.) wrote that Mencius “composed” (*zuo* 作) a text in seven sections (Sima 1959: 74.2343),<sup>1</sup> and later Han writers, including Zhao (Jiao 1987: 1.3)<sup>2</sup> and his contemporary YING Shao 應劭 (140–206), reported similar opinions. Ying specified that Mencius’s book comprised 11 sections (Wang

---

<sup>1</sup>One comment by Sima implies that he possessed some kind of written text: “Whenever I read Mencius’s book and come to [the passage where] King Hui of Liang asks, ‘By what means can I benefit my state?’ I set down the book and sigh” 余讀孟子書，至梁惠王問「何以利吾國」，未嘗不廢書而嘆也 (Sima 1959: 74.2343). Cf. Hunter 2014: 38. The wording in the received *Mencius* is slightly different: “Surely you have some means to profit my state” 亦將有以利吾國乎 (Jiao 1987: 2.35).

<sup>2</sup>Zhao stated that the book was composed by Mencius (*Mengzi zhi suo zuo* 孟子之所作; Jiao 1987: 1.3), though later he complicated the picture by explaining that it was patterned after the model of the *Analects*, which, in his view, was compiled by Confucius’s disciples rather than by Confucius himself (1.14). He also asserted that Emperor Wen 文帝 (r. 180–157 B.C.) sponsored an Erudite (*boshi* 博士) specializing in the *Mencius*, though the position was later abolished (1.17). The last claim, which cannot be corroborated by any other source, has been questioned since the Song 宋 dynasty (Hunter 2014: 70).

---

P. R. Goldin (✉)

East Asian Languages & Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA  
e-mail: [prg@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:prg@sas.upenn.edu)

1981: 7.319),<sup>3</sup> so he was presumably not referring to the same edition as SIMA Qian, and Zhao famously explained that he produced the current edition in seven sections by eliminating four that he considered inferior (Jiao 1987: 1.15).<sup>4</sup> Thus it would be incautious to assume that the seven sections of ZHAO Qi's edition were identical to the seven that SIMA Qian mentioned (Hunter 2014: 72). This is essentially all that can be said of the text of *Mencius* during the Han dynasty. We know next to nothing.

## 2 Peculiarities in the Distribution of References to *Mencius* in Han Texts

There are, however, many references to Mencius in Han texts, and they present an interesting distribution that has never, to my knowledge, been analyzed. Digital databases have made it easier than ever before to conduct such searches; in fact, the Institute of Chinese Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong has conveniently published (Chan and Ho 2007) all the allusions to Mencius that a search program was able to locate within CHANT, their superb database of ancient Chinese texts. The list errs on the side of inclusiveness and contains some items that might be false positives, but the data still suffice to yield a significant and surprising result: many of the passages considered crucial today were never cited in the Han dynasty.<sup>5</sup>

For example, not a single extant Han source cites *Mencius* 1B8, on the dethronement of the tyrants Jie 桀 and Zhòu 紂 by the sage kings Tang 湯 and Wu 武王, the founders of the Shang 商 and Zhou 周 dynasties, respectively:

King Xuan of Qi (r. 319–301 B.C.) asked: “Tang deposed Jie; King Wu attacked Zhòu—did these things happen?”

Mencius replied: “They are in the records.”

[The King asked]: “Is it acceptable for a minister to assassinate his lord?”

[Mencius said]: “One who pillages his humanity is called a pillager; one who pillages his righteousness is called a slaughterer. Someone who is a pillager or slaughterer is called ‘one man.’ I have heard of their punishing ‘one man’; I have not heard of their assassinating their lord.”<sup>6</sup> (Jiao 1987: 5.145)

<sup>3</sup>As does the bibliographical chapter of the *History of the Han* 漢書 (Ban 1962: 30.1725). YING Shao's testimony is often overlooked in recent treatments of the problem, such as Van Ess 2015b: 288.

<sup>4</sup>These four so-called “Outer Books” (*waishu* 外書) did not survive, and mischief-makers throughout the centuries preyed on credulous literati by producing “rediscovered” forgeries (Deng and Wang 1998: 216–17).

<sup>5</sup>In addition to the examples below, one passage that is never cited in Han texts is 7B21: “Narrow footpaths in the hills become roads when they are used steadily” 山徑之蹊間，介然用之而成路 (Jiao 1987: 28.982). This has been made famous in modern times by allusions by LU Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) and Barack Obama (Lu 1976: 94; Ho 2010: 223n.1).

<sup>6</sup>齊宣王問曰：「湯放桀，武王伐紂，有諸？」孟子對曰：「於傳有之。」曰：「臣弑其君可乎？」曰：「賊仁者謂之賊，賊義者謂之殘，殘賊之人謂之一夫。聞誅一夫紂矣，未聞弑君也。」

This is a tense passage because it requires Mencius to balance his concept of Heaven's Mandate (*tianming* 天命) with the presumption that regicide cannot normally be permissible.<sup>7</sup> As we know from other sections, notably 5A, Mencius believed that Heaven decreed the establishment of the Shang and Zhou dynasties (cf. Pines 2005: 275ff.), but this dialogue reminds us that the transfer of power was violent.<sup>8</sup> Here, Mencius defends Tang and King Wu against the charge of assassination on the grounds that Jie and Zhòu forfeited the right to be considered lords through their own unbecoming conduct.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, killing them was condign punishment, not assassination.

Some rulers were uncomfortable with such arguments, because they seemed to permit subjects to pass judgment on the sovereign. For example, Emperor Jing of Han 漢景帝 (r. 157–141 B.C.) intervened in a debate between two courtiers because he thought it was veering too close to the perilous topic of whether Tang and Wu had received Heaven's Mandate, and “thereafter, no scholars dared to elucidate [the question] of who had received the Mandate and who had deposed and killed [the sovereign unlawfully]” 是後學者莫敢明受命放殺者 (Sima 1959: 3123).<sup>10</sup> Much later, the Hongwu 洪武 Emperor (r. 1368–1398) went so far as to expunge relevant sections from *Mencius* (Elman 2013: 20 f.). Justin Tiwald has recently explored the question of whether a right of rebellion can be inferred from Mencius's position (Tiwald 2008). Any modern discussion of Mencian political philosophy must take this passage into account.

But no Han text makes quite the same argument. There is a possible allusion in *The Master of Huainan* 淮南子: “Tang deposed Jie and King Wu attacked Zhòu in order to rid the world of pillagers and eliminate slaughterers”<sup>11</sup> (He 1998: 20.1395). *The Master of Huainan* does not attribute this opinion to Mencius, however, and more significantly, it does not adopt the extreme position that Tang and King Wu did not commit a crime: “They can be called charitable lords, but they cannot be called loyal subjects”<sup>12</sup> (*ibid.*). This is in line with the mainstream Han-dynasty view that Tang and King Wu were undoubtedly guilty of usurpation, but that the good in them outweighed the bad,<sup>13</sup> as in the following discussion by JIA Yi 賈誼 (201–169 B.C.):

<sup>7</sup> Compare the *Gongyang Commentary*: “There may be no plots against lords or parents; if someone should plot [against them], he must be executed for it” 君親無將，將而必誅焉 (Liu 2010: 506).

<sup>8</sup> Compare *Mencius* 7B3, where Mencius states that he does not believe the account of the Zhou conquest of Shang in the *Documents* (*Shu* 書), presumably because it depicts more bloodshed than his philosophy can readily accommodate.

<sup>9</sup> The idea is reminiscent of *Analects* 12.11: “Let the lord act as a lord” 君君 (cf. Goldin 2020: 48).

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Yuri Pines for this and other references. For a survey of pre-imperial and early imperial opinions of Tang and Wu, see Cao 2017: 58–62.

<sup>11</sup> 湯放桀，武王伐紂，以為天下去殘除賊。

<sup>12</sup> 可謂惠君，而未可謂忠臣矣。

<sup>13</sup> Compare the opinion of LU Jia 陸賈 (ca. 228–140 B.C.): “Tang and Wu seized [power] by rebelling but maintained it by complying [with morality]” 湯武逆取而以順守之 (Sima 1959: 97.2699; Ban 1962: 43.2113).

Tang of Yin (i.e. Shang) deposed Jie; King Wu assassinated Zhòu. These are things that the whole world has heard. To be a minister and depose one's lord, to be an inferior and assassinate one's superior—these are the most rebellious actions in the world. But the reason why they possessed the world was that they opened profit and eliminated harm in the world, and bequeathed it [to their posterity] with righteousness. Thus their names have been praised throughout the world and transmitted to later generations. We hide their evil and extol their virtuous glory; we establish their shining merit and transmit it far and wide. Thus everyone in the world says that theirs was the supreme government of sage emperors.<sup>14</sup> (Yan and Zhong 2000: 10.409)

If it shocks us today that as conservative a writer as JIA Yi called Tang and Wu assassins, it is only because of the outsize influence that *Mencius* 1B8 subsequently attained. JIA Yi's approval of "opening profit" is also strikingly un-Mencian (cf. below).

Similarly, most modern discussions of the Mencian critique of Mohism focus on the debate with Yizhi 夷之<sup>15</sup> in *Mencius* 3A5 (e.g., Nivison 1996: 133–48). The passage is too long to be quoted here, but the crux is that although Yizhi espouses the Mohist credo that burials should be sparse (*bo* 薄), he buried his own parents sumptuously (*hou* 厚)—and was right to do so, because his very humanity was urging him to treat his parents with due respect. Thus one of the main objections to Mohism is that it runs counter to our humane instincts. No surviving Han text ever refers to this dialogue. The passage bearing on Master Mo that is most frequently cited is 3B9 (e.g., by YING Shao in Wang 1981: 7.319), where Mencius responds to the charge of being overly fond of disputation (*haobian* 好辯) by asserting that he must vigorously combat the ways of YANG Zhu and MO Di 楊、墨之道 or else the Confucian way will not flourish. But this passage sheds less light on the basis of Mencius's objection to Mohism: it states only that the famous Mohist doctrine of "universal love" (*jian'ai* 兼愛) is tantamount to "not having a father" (*wufu* 無父), and not having a father is bestial.<sup>16</sup>

### 3 One Explanation: Before Neo-Confucianism, Mencius Was Not Regarded as a Sage

Other examples convey that Mencius's cultural status was lower before his apotheosis under Neo-Confucianism.<sup>17</sup> One of the most distinctive concepts in Han Confucianism is *quan* 權, literally "weighing one thing against another" (Graham

<sup>14</sup>殷湯放桀，武王弑紂，此天下之所同聞也。為人臣而放其君，為人下而弑其上，天下之至逆也。而所以有天下者，以為天下開利除害，以義繼之也，故聲名稱於天下而傳於後世。隱其惡而揚其德美，立其功烈而傳之於久遠，故天下皆稱聖帝至治。

<sup>15</sup>The name means "Destroy It." Perhaps the idea is that Yizhi's ideology would destroy his inherent humanity? Such meaningful epithets are not uncommon in classical Chinese prose (Goldin 2005a: 6–11).

<sup>16</sup>For more on the use of slogans like *jian'ai* as abbreviated references to Mohist positions, see Defoort 2014.

<sup>17</sup>That is to say, what Zhou 1996: 289–90 called "the movement of elevating Mencius" 孟子的「升格運動」had not yet commenced.

1978: 184) or, as I have defined it elsewhere, “disregarding an otherwise binding norm (*jing* 經) when exigent circumstances warrant” (Goldin 2005b: 19). The most extended Han discussion of *quan* appears in the *Gongyang Commentary to the Springs and Autumns* 春秋公羊傳 (Liu 2010: 81), which asks whether a minister named ZHAI Zhong 祭仲 (d. 682 B.C.) is to be praised or condemned for saving his state by acquiescing to a powerful enemy’s request that he dethrone his ruler. The answer is that in cases of life or death, such an act is acceptable as *quan*, provided that it causes no injury to others (cf. Zhang 2005: 91–158; Vankeerberghen 2005–2006: 74ff.).

Today, however, *Mencius* 4A17, rather than the *Gongyang Commentary*, is regarded as the *locus classicus* of *quan*<sup>18</sup>:

CHUNYU Kun (fl. 320–311 B.C.) said: “Is it ritually correct that when males and females give and take, they are not to touch each other?”

Mencius said: “That is ritually correct.”

[Chunyu] said: “If one’s sister-in-law is drowning, does one extend one’s hand to her?”

[Mencius] said: “One who does not extend [his hand] when his sister-in-law is drowning is a jackal or a wolf. It is ritually correct that when males and females give and take, they are not to touch each other, but to extend one’s hand to one’s sister-in-law when she is drowning—that is *quan*.”<sup>19</sup> (Jiao 1987: 15.520f.)

The fact that Han discussions of *quan* almost always orient themselves around the catechism in the *Gongyang Commentary*, and do not ever cite *Mencius* 4A17 (a point not observed by Liu 1998: 421ff.), suggests that the former was more apt to be recognized as a proof text. We must remember that the Five Canons (*Changes* 易, *Documents* 書, *Odes* 詩, *Rites* 禮, and *Springs and Autumns* 春秋) held sway during this era (Nylan 2001: 23–51); the Neo-Confucian notion that the essence of Chinese philosophy is encapsulated in the so-called Four Books (*Analects* 論語, *Mencius*, *Great Learning* 大學, and *Application of Equilibrium* 中庸) still lay at least a millennium in the future (e.g., Gardner 2007). In this intellectual environment, an authorized commentary to the *Springs and Autumns* enjoyed greater prestige than the words of a non-canonical philosopher such as Mencius. Though admired by many, Mencius was still regarded as fallible. WANG Chong 王充 (b. A.D. 27) wrote an essay critiquing Mencius (Huang 1990: 10.30.450–68) in language that later imperial literati would not have dared to deploy. The range of Han opinions shows how radical it was, a few centuries later, for HAN Yu 韓愈 (768–824) to declare Mencius the last of the ancient sages (e.g., Ma 1957: 1.10; cf. Hartman 1986: 179ff.).

<sup>18</sup> It is possible, however, that the discussions of *quan* in the Mohist Canons are older (Zhang 2005: 120 f.; Lu 2004: 229 f.).

<sup>19</sup> 淳于髡曰：「男女授受不親，禮與？」孟子曰：「禮也。」曰：「嫂溺，則援之以手乎？」曰：「嫂溺不援，是豺狼也。男女授受不親，禮也。嫂溺援之以手者，權也。」

## 4 Innate Knowledge and Human Nature

Freeing oneself of Neo-Confucian perspectives might also clarify why no Han text refers to the concepts of “innate ability” (*liangneng* 良能) and “innate knowledge” (*liangzhi* 良知) from *Mencius* 7A15: “What people are able to do without having studied it is their *liangneng*; what they know without having pondered it is their *liangzhi*”<sup>20</sup> (Jiao 1987: 26.897). Since Wang Shouren 王守仁 (1472–1529), *liangzhi* has been taken to be almost synonymous with Mencianism:

The Way is nothing other than “innate knowledge.” From the beginning, pure knowledge is perfectly intact. Through it, what is right [is perceived as] right; through it, what is wrong [is perceived as] wrong. If you just rely on it with regard to right and wrong, there will not be any spot [in you] that is not right. This pure knowledge, after all, is your enlightened teacher.<sup>21</sup> (Chen 1983: §265)

We can tentatively infer from the lack of references to *liangzhi* and the debate with Yizhi, discussed above, that the idea of the inherently good impulses of human nature was not considered as fundamental to Mencian philosophy in Han times as it has been since the rise of Neo-Confucian discourse. This observation bears on the Mencian theory of human nature (*xing* 性), and dovetails with the most surprising result of all, namely that no Han text ever cites the parable of the infant that is about to fall into a well (*Mencius* 2A6).<sup>22</sup> For modern readers, there is perhaps no more quintessentially Mencian passage than this.

Suppose a person suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well. Everyone [in such a situation] would have a frightened, compassionate heart, not in order to ingratiate himself with the child’s parents, not because he wants praise from his neighbors and friends, and not because he would hate to have the reputation<sup>23</sup> [of one who would not save an innocent child].<sup>24</sup> (Jiao 1987: 7.233)

It would be a mistake, however, to surmise that Han writers were unaware of or uninterested in the Mencian theory of human nature. Rather, they did not regard this particular passage as crucial to the doctrine. Several Han sources discuss theories of human nature and attribute to Mencius phrases and passages substantially similar to what is found in the received text. For example, the works of WANG Chong leave little doubt that he had access to a written text of *Mencius* (cf. Hunter 2014: 71), as in this excerpt:

Mencius wrote the chapter “Human Nature Is Good.” His view was that human nature is all good; if it becomes not good, this is because external objects have disordered it. He meant

<sup>20</sup> 人之所不學而能者，其良能也；所不慮而知者，其良知也。

<sup>21</sup> 道即是良知：真知原是完完全全。是的，還他是；非的，還他非。是非，只依著他，更無有不是處。這真知還是你的明師。

<sup>22</sup> Fear of a child’s falling into a well is attested in other early sources (e.g., *Analec*s 6.24; *Mozi* 墨子, Wu 2006: 1.5.35; and *Mencius* 3A5).

<sup>23</sup> Or perhaps “... cannot abide the sound [of the wailing infant].”

<sup>24</sup> 今人乍見孺子將入於井，皆有怵惕惻隱之心。非所以內交於孺子之父母也，非所以要譽於鄉黨朋友也，非惡其聲而然也。

that when people are born in the world, they all receive a good nature, but as they grow into adults and come into contact with external objects, they become undisciplined and fractious, and thereby less good every day. ... Master Gao was a coeval of Mencius. His theory was that there is no distinction between good and bad in human nature. He compared it to a whirlpool: if you open a channel for it to the east, then it [will flow] to the east; if you open a channel for it to the west, then it [will flow] to the west. There is no distinction between east and west in the case of water, just as there is no distinction between good and bad in human nature.<sup>25</sup> (Huang 1990: 3.13.133 and 136)

These comments are informative for two reasons. First, WANG Chong names one of the chapters that ZHAO Qi would later claim to have excised from his recension: “Human Nature Is Good.” Sometimes the words “human nature is all good; if it becomes not good, this is because external objects have disordered it”<sup>26</sup> (which do not appear in the received text of *Mencius*) are thought to be a direct quotation from that lost chapter. There is no way to be sure, because pre-modern Chinese books did not have quotations marks, but if it is a direct quote, then this passage affords us a rare glimpse of *Mencius* as it stood before ZHAO Qi permanently disfigured it.

Second, WANG Chong’s synopsis of Master Gao’s theory is almost identical to *Mencius* 6A2:

Master Gao said: “Human nature is like a whirlpool: if you open a channel for it to the east, it will flow to the east; if you open a channel for it to the west, it will flow to the west. There is no distinction between good and not good in human nature, just as there is no distinction between west and east in the case of water.”<sup>27</sup> (Jiao 1987: 22.735)

Thus although WANG Chong proves to have been at least as familiar with Mencius’s teachings as we are today,<sup>28</sup> he did not consider it necessary to refer to 2A6. He did, however, allude elsewhere to the episode involving King Xuan of Qi and the sacrificial ox from *Mencius* 1A7 (Huang 1990: 19.58.828), as do several other Han texts.<sup>29</sup> Philosophically, the purposes of *Mencius* 1A7 and 2A6 are congruent: to demonstrate that human beings have good impulses, and that the path to goodness lies to extending those impulses to one’s daily actions (cf. Goldin 2020: 86ff.). Thus it remains curious that 1A7 was so widely cited by Han authors when 2A6 was not.

<sup>25</sup> 孟子作《性善》之篇，以為人性皆善，及其不善，物亂之也。謂人生於天地，皆稟善性，長大與物交接者，放縱悖亂，不善日以生矣。……告子與孟子同時，其論性無善惡之分，譬之湍水，決之東則東，決之西則西。夫水無分於東西，猶人無分於善惡也。

<sup>26</sup> 人性皆善，及其不善，物亂之也。

<sup>27</sup> 告子曰：「性猶湍水也，決諸東方則東流，決諸西方則西流。人性之無分於善不善也，猶水之無分於東西也。」

<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that WANG Chong did not accept Mencius’s theory of human nature as completely correct; on his view, it is applicable only to those who are above average (Huang 1990: 3.13.142–43).

<sup>29</sup> See the list at Chan and Ho 2007: 348. They seem to have been particularly fond of the conclusion that noble men must stay away from the kitchen (*yuan paochu* 遠庖廚).

No less noteworthy is the fact that Han texts make no mention of the Four Beginnings (*siduan* 四端).<sup>30</sup> In the current arrangement of 2A6, immediately after the parable of the infant, we read the following:

From this we see: Whoever lacks a commiserating heart is not a human being. Whoever lacks a heart of shame is not a human being. Whoever lacks a heart of deference is not a human being. Whoever lacks a heart of right and wrong is not a human being. The heart of commiseration is the beginning of humanity. The heart of shame is the beginning of righteousness. The heart of deference is the beginning of ritual. The heart of right and wrong is the beginning of wisdom. Human beings have these Four Beginnings just as they have four limbs.<sup>31</sup> (Jiao 1987: 7.233–35)

Han writers did cite some of these phrases. YING Shao, for example, wrote: “Mencius censured those who lack a commiserating heart,”<sup>32</sup> followed by an unmistakable quote from *Mencius* 7A44 (Wang 1981: 5.230). Likewise, in his commentary on *Ritual Records* 禮記, ZHENG Xuan 鄭玄 (A.D. 127–200) quoted Mencius as saying: “Someone who lacks a heart of right and wrong is not a human being”<sup>33</sup> (Ruan 1980: 1240a). But unfortunately, neither of these scraps tells us whether the authors knew about the Four Beginnings.

## 5 Popular Passages from *Mencius* in Han Texts

Which passages *are* attested in Han sources?<sup>34</sup> By far the most common is Mencius’s audience with King Hui of Liang 梁惠王 (r. 370–319 B.C.) in 1A1–3 (see the many references at Chan and Ho 2007: 343ff.). The presentation of the circumstances is not always the same; for instance, *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) places ZOU Yan 鄒衍 (305?–240? B.C.) and the aforementioned CHUNYU Kun alongside Mencius during the famous interview, and also grants King Hui more lines (Sima 1959: 44.1847; cf. Hunter 2014: 68). But the basic idea that the purpose of

<sup>30</sup>The phrase “the beginnings of humanity and righteousness” (*renyi zhi duan* 仁義之端) appears in *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Guo 1961: 1B.2.93), and makes sense in that context as a disapproving allusion to Mencian philosophy.

<sup>31</sup>由是觀之，無惻隱之心，非人也；無羞惡之心，非人也；無辭讓之心，非人也；無是非之心，非人也。惻隱之心，仁之端也；羞惡之心，義之端也；辭讓之心，禮之端也；是非之心，智之端也。人之有是四端也，猶其有四體也。

<sup>32</sup>孟軻譏無惻隱之心。

<sup>33</sup>人無是非之心，非人也。

<sup>34</sup>Chen 2000 emphasizes Mencius’s influence on Han-dynasty classical studies; for example, the claim in *Mencius* 3B9 that Confucius wrote the *Springs and Autumns* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) “immensely aroused later Confucians” 給儒家後學以無窮的啓發 (45), but his theory suffers from the difficulty that no Han text cites this passage (and Van Ess 2015a suggests that it is an interpolation). SIMA Qian also attributed the *Spring and Autumns* to Confucius (Sima 1959: 47.1943), but did not state that he borrowed this theory from Mencius.



government is inculcating righteousness (*yi* 義) rather than profit-seeking (*li* 利)<sup>35</sup> evidently resounded with Han literati. *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (*Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論) contains the following typical example:

If you put profit-seeking first and righteousness last, people will grab and steal insatiably. The chief ministers and officials will accumulate millions; grandees will accumulate thousands of pieces of gold; civil servants will accumulate hundreds of pieces of gold. While they hoard by seeking profit for themselves and multiplying their wealth, the common people are cold and miserable, like vagabonds along the roads. How then can scholars keep their cap and robe intact?<sup>36</sup> (Wang 1992: 4.16.209–10)

Literati who sought to minimize the role of government in economic affairs found a strong ancient ally in Mencius, and in *Discourses on Salt and Iron*, they did not hesitate to invoke him (Jin 2006: 250–55; Dong 1997: 163). It may be the earliest text to quote Mencius more frequently than Master Xun 荀子 (i.e. Xun Kuang 荀況, third century B.C.), and marked the beginning of Mencius's ascent, as he soon outstripped Master Xun, the former cynosure of elite philosophy, and then nearly obliterated him (cf. Goldin 2007: 164ff.).

The material in today's sprawling 2A2 is also commonly cited. No fewer than three texts attribute the phrase “flood-like” (*haoran* 浩然) explicitly to Mencius: the postface to *History of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書, Ban 1962: 100A.4227); WANG Chong's *Balance of Discourses* (Huang 1990: 10.30.460)<sup>37</sup>; and one of the chapters of *Luxuriant Dew of the Springs and Autumns* (*Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露, Su 1992: 16.77.447) that cannot be confidently associated with DONG Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 198-ca. 107 B.C.), the nominal author.<sup>38</sup> WANG Chong mentions the foolish farmer from Song 宋 as well (Huang 1990: 18.54.780), though without attributing the anecdote to Mencius.

Finally, the text known as *The Outer Commentary to the Hán Odes* (*Han Shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳), by HAN Ying 韓嬰 (fl. 150 B.C.), merits special attention both because it provides alternative, and usually lengthier, versions of passages in the received *Mencius* (Hunter 2014: 65ff.), and because of its two singular anecdotes involving Mencius's mother. In the first (Xu 1980: 9.1.306), we learn that she

<sup>35</sup> “Profit-seeking” was the dominant interpretation of *li* in this context, but not all readers agreed. WANG Chong complained that Mencius rashly took *li* to mean “profit pertaining to goods and wealth” 貨財之利, but it could also refer to “the profit of security and good fortune” 安吉之利 (Huang 1990: 10.30.450), in other words, “profit” of a less materialistic kind. He went on to criticize Mencius for not asking King Hui to specify.

<sup>36</sup> 苟先利而後義，取奪不厭。公卿積億萬，大夫積千金，士積百金。利己并財以聚；百姓寒苦，流離於路。儒獨何以完其衣冠也？

<sup>37</sup> Like so much else from WANG Chong's pen, this reference is sardonic. The text says: “When [Mencius's] own fate did not permit him to bring peace and order to the world, he was not ‘flood-like’ and serene in Qi, but bore hatred in his breast and had a discontented complexion; it was a failing” 己命不當平治天下，不浩然安之於齊，懷恨有不豫之色，失之矣。That is to say, Mencius, who bragged of his ability to nourish his flood-like *qi* 氣, could not even accept his lot without pouting.

<sup>38</sup> On the complex relationship between this text and DONG Zhongshu, see, most recently, Loewe 2011: 191–224.

would keep a watchful eye on her young son, from behind her spinning wheel, as he recited his lessons (evidently there was no father), and that she would not tell him white lies, even if the truth was uncomfortable; in the second (*ibid.*: 9.17.322), he is now a married man and chides his wife for squatting inappropriately in her room, whereupon his mother chides *him* for spying on his unsuspecting mate. In neither anecdote is Mencius's own wisdom central; on the contrary, in the latter he is a priggish butt for his mother's more nuanced moral sense. Clearly, the idea is that Mencius owed much of his success to his sagacious mother's instruction. The origin of such traditions about Mencius's mother are a mystery,<sup>39</sup> as *The Outer Commentary to the Hân Odes* is the oldest extant text attesting to them. Later, LIU Xiang 劉向 (79–8 B.C.) elaborated on these anecdotes and added two others to produce a miniature biography of Mencius's mother for his *Categorized Biographies of Women* (*Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, Wang 1937: 1.15–18).

## 6 Conclusion

How do we account for the evidence surveyed above? First, there is the problem of evaluating *argumentum ex silentio*. Mencius appears in Han texts when his authority is forensically useful (for example, 1A1 in *Discourses on Salt and Iron*, which raises principled, if unworldly, objections to state monopolies); one cannot safely infer from their silences that Han authors were unaware of other aspects of his philosophy. I suspect that concepts such as the Four Beginnings must have been widely known (or else Han literati could scarcely have comprehended Mencius's theory of human nature), but such is the paucity of the evidence that even this supposition is insecure.

Moreover, reviewing the reception of Mencius in the Han dynasty is instructive because it reveals how heavily Neo-Confucianized our understanding remains today, centuries after figures such as WANG Shouren. Many of the passages that are never cited in Han sources, such as 2A6 (the infant about to fall into a well) and 7A15 (innate knowledge), are central to Neo-Confucianism, which has informed our expectations of Mencian discourse. Han literati had different concerns. As they grew apprehensive of the imperial state, whose expansionist campaigns contravened its duty to care for its subjects (cf. Nylan 2011: 109), what they deemed most significant about Mencius seems to have been his willingness to stand up to a monarch and extol righteousness over wealth. As YANG Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.–A.D. 18) wrote, cleverly alluding to both *Mencius* 3B2 and 2A2: “[Mencius] was courageous in

---

<sup>39</sup>Lewis 2012: 253ff. discusses later representations of the relationship between Master Zeng 曾子, a leading disciple of Confucius, and his mother. There are some comments about Confucius's mother, Yan Zhengzai 顏徵在 (Eno 2003: 8–11), but she is not credited with decisive influence over his education. (It should also be noted that Zhengzai, meaning “The Manifestation Is Present,” is a highly suspicious name for the mother of a sage.) On the wisdom of mothers in classical Chinese texts generally, see, e.g., Goldin 2002: 53ff.

righteousness and resolute in virtue. He did not let poverty or wealth, nobility or lowliness, or life or death sway his heart. Was his courage not abundant?"<sup>40</sup> (Wang 1987: 16.11.419).

## References

- Ban, Gu 班固 (A.D. 32–92). 1962. *History of the Han* 漢書. 12 vols. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Cao, Wanfeng 曹婉豐. 2017. "Changing Ideas about Revolution in Pre-Qin, Qin, and Han Confucianism" 先秦秦漢儒家革命思想變遷. *History of Chinese Philosophy* 中國哲學史 2: 58–63, 78.
- Chan, Hung Kan 陳雄根, and Che Wah Ho 何志華. 2007. *Citations from the Zhouyi, Lunyu, and Mengzi to Be Found in Pre-Han and Han Texts* 先秦兩漢典籍引《周易》資料彙編、先秦兩漢典籍引《論語》資料彙編、先秦兩漢典籍引《孟子》資料彙編. CHANT Series. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Chen, Rongjie 陳榮傑. 1983. *Wang Yangming's Instructions for Practical Living, with Detailed Commentary and Collected Criticism* 王陽明傳習錄詳註集評. Taipei 台北: Xuesheng shuju 學生書局.
- Chen, Tongsheng 陳桐生. 2000. "Mencius Was the Vanguard of Western Han New-Script Classical Studies" 孟子是西漢今文經學的先驅. *Shantou University Journal (Humanities Bimonthly)* 汕頭大學學報(人文科學版) 2: 44–50, 71.
- Defoort, Carine. 2014. "Do the Ten Mohist Theses Represent Mozi's Thought? Reading the Masters with a Focus on Mottos." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77 (2): 337–370.
- Deng, Ruiquan 鄧瑞全, and Guanying Wang 王冠英. 1998. *A Comprehensive Examination of Forged Chinese Books* 中國偽書綜考. Hefei 合肥: Huangshan chubanshe 黃山出版社.
- Dong, Hongli 董洪利. 1997. *Studies on Mencius* 孟子研究. Nanjing 南京: Jiangsu guji chubanshe 江蘇古籍出版社.
- Elman, Benjamin A. 2013. *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Eno, Robert. 2003. "The Background of the Kong Family of Lu and the Origins of Ruism." *Early China* 28: 1–41.
- Gardner, Daniel K. 2007. *The Four Books: The Basic Teachings of the Later Confucian Tradition*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Goldin, Paul Rakita. 2002. *The Culture of Sex in Ancient China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Goldin, Paul R. 2005a. *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- . 2005b. "The Theme of the Primacy of the Situation in Classical Chinese Philosophy and Rhetoric." *Asia Major* (third series) 18(2): 1–25.
- . 2007. "Xunzi and Early Han Philosophy." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 67 (1): 135–166.
- . 2020. *The Art of Chinese Philosophy: Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Graham, A.C. 1978. *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Guo, Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1896). 1961. *Zhuangzi, with Collected Explanations* 莊子集釋, ed. Wang Xiaoyu 王孝魚, 4 vols. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.

<sup>40</sup> 勇於義而果於德，不以貧富、貴賤、死生動其心，於勇也，其庶乎？

- Hartman, Charles. 1986. *Han Yü and the T'ang Search for Unity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- He, Ning 何寧. 1998. *The Master of Huainan, with Collected Explanations* 淮南子集釋, 3 vols. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Ho, Wing-chung. 2010. *The Transition Study of Postsocialist China: An Ethnographic Study of a Model Community*. Singapore: World Scientific.
- Huang, Hui 黃暉. 1990. *The Balance of Discourses, with Collations and Explanations (With Liu Pansui's Collected Explanations Appended)* 論衡校釋(附劉盼遂集解), 4 vols. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Hunter, Michael. 2014. "Did Mencius Know the *Analects*?" *T'oung Pao* 100 (1–3): 33–79.
- Jiao, Xun 焦循 (1763–1820). 1987. *The Correct Meaning of Mencius* 孟子正義, ed. Wenzhuo Shen 沈文偉, 2 vols. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Jin, Chunfeng 金春峰. 2006. *A History of Han Thought* 漢代思想史. Revised 3rd ed. Beijing 北京: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社.
- Lewis, Mark Edward. 2012. "Mothers and Sons in Early Imperial China." *Père institué, père questionné*, ed. Romain Graziani and Rainier Lanselle. *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* (hors-série), 245–275.
- Liu, Zebo 劉澤波. 1998. *A Critical Biography of Mencius* 孟子評傳. Nanjing 南京: Nanjing Daxue chubanshe 南京大學出版社.
- Liu, Shangci 劉尚慈. 2010. *The Gongyang Commentary to the Springs and Autumns, Translated with Commentary* 春秋公羊傳譯注. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Loewe, Michael. 2011. *Dong Zhongshu, a "Confucian" Heritage and the Chunqiu fanlu*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Lu, Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936). 1976. *Outcry* 吶喊. Beijing 北京: Renmin wuxue chubanshe 人民文學出版社.
- Lu, Ruirong 盧瑞容. 2004. *An Inquiry into Ancient Chinese "Relationality"—An Analysis Tracing the Origins of the Concepts of "Situational Power," "Harmony," "Weighing," and "Flexibility"* 中國古代「相對關係」思維探討—「勢」「和」「權」「屈曲」概念溯源分析. Taipei 台北: Shangding wenhua chubanshe 商鼎文化出版社.
- Ma, Tongbo 馬通伯. 1957. *The Collected Works of Han Yu, with Collations and Commentary* 韓昌黎文集校注. Shanghai 上海: Gudian wuxue chubanshe 古典文學出版社.
- Nivison, David S. 1996. In *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden. Chicago/La Salle: Open Court.
- Nylan, Michael. 2001. *The Five "Confucian" Classics*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- . 2011. *Yang Xiong and the Pleasures of Reading and Classical Learning in China*. New Haven: American Oriental Society.
- Pines, Yuri. 2005. "Disputers of Abdication: Zhanguo Egalitarianism and the Sovereign's Power." *T'oung Pao* 91 (4–5): 243–300.
- Ruan, Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849). 1980. *The Thirteen Canons, with Commentary, Subcommentary, and Appended Collation Notes* 十三經注疏附校勘記.
- Sima, Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86? B.C.E.). 1959. *Records of the Historian* 史記. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Su, Yu 蘇輿 (d. 1914). 1992. *The Verified Meaning of Luxuriant Dew of the Springs and Autumns* 春秋繁露義證, ed. Zhong Zhe 鍾哲. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Tiwald, Justin. 2008. "A Right of Rebellion in the *Mengzi*?" *Dao* 7 (3): 269–282.
- Van Ess, Hans. 2015a. "*Mengzi* 3B9 und die Unzufriedenheit mit dem Recht der Han." *Bochumer Jahrbuch zur Ostasienforschung* 38: 225–243.
- . 2015b. "Reflections on the Sequence of the First Three Books of the *Mengzi*." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 41 (3–4): 287–306.
- Vankeerberghen, Griet. 2005–2006. "Choosing Balance: Weighing (*quan*) as a Metaphor for Action in Early Chinese Texts." *Early China* 30: 47–89.
- Wang, Zhaoyuan 王照園 (1763–1851). 1937. *Categorized Biographies of Women, with Supplements and Commentary* 列女傳補注. [Changsha 長沙:] Shangwu yinshuguan 商務印書館.

- Wang, Liqi 王利器. 1981. *Comprehensive Discussion of Customs, with Collations and Commentary* 風俗通義校注. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Wang, Rongbao 汪榮寶 (1878–1933). 1987. *Model Sayings: Meaning and Subcommentary* 法言義疏. Ed. Chen Zhongfu 陳仲夫. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Wang, Liqi. 1992. *Discourses on Salt and Iron, with Collations and Commentary* 鹽鐵論校注. Revised edition. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Wu, Yujiang 吳毓江. 2006. *Mozi, with Collations and Commentary* 墨子校注, ed. Qizhi Sun 孫啟治, 2nd ed, 2 vols. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Xu, Weiyu 許維遜. 1980. *The Outer Commentary to the Hán Odes, with Collected Explanations* 韓詩外傳集釋. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Yan, Zhenyi 閻振益, and Xia Zhong 鐘夏. 2000. *New Writings, with Collations and Commentary* 新書校注. Beijing 北京: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局.
- Zhang, Duansui 張端穗. 2005. *Studies on Gongyang Scholarship in the Western Han* 西漢公羊學研究. Taipei 台北: Wenjin chubanshe 文津出版社.
- Zhou, Yutong 周予同 (1898–1981). 1996. *A Selection of Zhou Yutong's Works on the History of Classical Studies* 周予同經學史論著選集, ed. Zhu Weizheng 朱維鈺. Enlarged edition. Shanghai 上海: Renmin chubanshe 人民出版社.