

Chapter 14

Mencius and Early Chinese Political Thought



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1 Introduction

Mencius's political thought is rarely the focus of Western scholarly discussions. Insofar as the overwhelming majority of scholars who study Mencius in the West come from departments of philosophy or religion (Xiao 2006), and insofar as most philosophically-trained Western Sinologists habitually eschew political aspects of early Chinese thought (Pines 2015: 7–12), this comes as no surprise. Even a brief survey of Mencius-related publications in English will show overwhelming focus on questions of mind (*xin* 心), human nature (*xing* 性), ethical thought, self-cultivation, and the like, at the expense of political ideas. Recently this tendency began changing, with a series of studies that address connections between Mencius's political and moral ideas (Xiao 2006; Kim 2010a, b; and especially Kim 2019), explore his notion of righteous rebellion (Tiwald 2008; Nuyen 2013), or analyze the compatibility of his views with modern Western democracy (Yang 2004; Roetz 2008; Herr 2019). Political scientists as well start pay attention to Mencius's thought (e.g. El-Amine 2015). These welcome additions aside, some of the crucial topics in Mencius's thought, such as his views of rulership, of ruler-minister relations, of the intellectual's political role, and the like still remain under-explored in English-language publications.¹

¹For book-length English-language discussions of the *Mencius*, none of which pays sufficient attention to the text's political thought, see Shun 1997; Chan 2002; Liu 2003; Behuniak Jr 2004;

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This neglect is most regrettable. Mencius is not just an important political thinker of the Warring States period (*Zhanguo* 戰國, 453–221 BCE); he is also one of the most prolific. His book abounds with discussions with rulers, rival thinkers, and with his disciples, in which the thinker explores manifold issues of administrative, economic, and military policies, of political obligation of a *shi* 士 (man-of-service, intellectual), of the role of “the people” (*min* 民) in political life, and the like. Although few if any of Mencius’s recommendations were implemented—or could have been implemented—either in his life-time or afterwards, his ideas had undeniable impact on traditional Chinese political culture and as such they deserve utmost attention.

A reader of the *Mencius* will easily notice manifold ambiguities and apparent inconsistencies in the text (cf. Roetz 2008: 203). Mencius is both a staunch monarchist and one of the bitterest critics of current rulers. At times he speaks on behalf of the impoverished *shi* (6B4) and advocates “respecting the worthy and employing the able” (2A5), whereas at times he appears as protector of the vested interests of hereditary aristocrats (1B7). He declares the people as “the most esteemed” in the state (7B14), but also states that the commoners do not differ much from beasts and birds (4B19). He claims that service (*shi* 仕) is essential for the man-of-service (*shi* 士) just as tilling is for the peasant (3B3); but he also states: “The noble man has three joys, and ruling All-under-Heaven is not among them” (7A20), implying thereby that service is secondary to other forms of self-realization.

How to explain these ostensible contradictions? One possibility is that they were introduced into the text by distinct lineages of Mencius’s followers, who might have had different visions of the Master’s “proper message” (e.g., Brooks and Brooks 2002). Alternatively, they may reflect changes in Mencius’s views as time passed: for instance, changing political circumstances may have prompted the thinker to modify his approach to the issue of the ruler’s abdication (Li 2003). Yet without ruling out these answers, I tend toward the third explanation, according to which different emphases in Mencius’s pronouncements can be explained circumstantially: facing different audience or different contingencies the thinker could modify his arguments (Goldin 2005; cf. Eno 2002). This variability of approaches fits nicely Mencius’s declared dislike of staunchly “holding to a single [idea]” (7A26). More essentially, his apparent inconsistencies may reflect deep tensions underlying Mencius’s thought. These tensions derive from the thinker’s competing commitment to moral politics on the one hand and the need to adjust himself to the world of Realpolitik on the other. How to reconcile one’s lofty ideals with grim political reality? How to remain useful to the rulers without compromising one’s integrity? How to avoid the pitfalls of moral purism, which may nullify the thinker’s impact?

Huang et al. 2008. Compare with Perkins 2022, which dedicates the final chapter (pp. 210–241) to Mencius’s political ideas. Mencius’s political views are discussed in introductory-level studies of this thinker (Schwartz 1985: 278–288; Graham 1989: 113–117; Goldin 2020: 79–105; Jiang 2021: 149–183). In China and Japan, by contrast, Mencius’s political ideology is explored in dozens of studies; for a sample see Ichikawa 1963, 1964; Hsiao 1979: 143–213; Liu 1996 I: 175–199; Dong 1997: 39–78; Xia 2019; and more in the references below.

In the following pages I shall try to describe Mencius's choices, and focus on immense tensions that these choices generated.

2 Searching for the True Monarch: Mencius and the Rulers

The first chapter of the *Mencius* collects a series of putative dialogues between the thinker and the rulers of Wei 魏 and Qi 齊. The placement of these dialogues at the beginning of the book is not accidental: probably the book's compilers considered Mencius's sayings during the encounters with power-holders as an essential gateway to his thought. Among these conversations one is particularly reflective of Mencius's views of rulership:

Mencius had an audience with King Xiang of Liang (i.e. of Wei, 魏襄王, r. 318–296 BCE). Leaving the audience, he told [his entourage]: “When I observed him, he did not look like a ruler; when I approached him, there was nothing awesome to be seen. Abruptly he asked me: ‘How can All-under-Heaven be stabilized?’ I answered: ‘Stability is in unity.’—‘Who is able to unify it?’ I answered: ‘He, who has no proclivity toward killing, is able to unify it.’—‘Who will be able to follow him?’ I answered: ‘Nobody under Heaven will not follow him. [...] Today among the shepherds of the people there is none who has no proclivity toward killing. If there is one who has no proclivity toward killing, then the people of All-under-Heaven will crane their necks to look at him. If this really happens, the people will go over to him like water runs downwards: who will be able to stop this torrent?’” (1A6)²

This brief passage contains some of the most important elements of Mencius's political vision and is also useful to place Mencius within the broader framework of the Warring States-period thought. First is the thinker's empathic insistence that “stability is in unity.” This idea, viz. that only political unification of All-under-Heaven (*tianxia* 天下) will bring an end to bloodshed and turmoil, may well be considered the common thread of political ideologies in the Chinese world prior to the imperial unification of 221 BCE and beyond (Pines 2000; Pines 2012: 11–43). Second, Mencius hints that peace under Heaven can be brought in only by a single ruler: the one who is benevolent enough to garner genuine popular support worldwide. This conviction is yet another part of the common ground between Mencius and other thinkers of his age, who uniformly adopted the ideology of monarchism (Pines 2009: 25–53). Third, having confirmed his support of monarchic order, Mencius turns to sweeping criticism of current sovereigns: “Today among the shepherds of the people there is none who has no proclivity toward killing.” Worse, according to Mencius, King Xiang of Wei does not even resemble a ruler, lacking the awe that the ruler should generate. This radical criticism which dangerously approximates the subversion of the sovereign's power is one of the hallmarks of Mencius' thought, which distinguishes him critically from the majority of other thinkers, including those associated with Confucius (孔子, 551–479 BCE), his disciples, and his followers.

²All translations are mine, based on *Mengzi yizhu*.

Thus, already in this single passage, Mencius's views of rulership appear highly contradictory. The ruler is indispensable for attaining the supreme goal of stabilization of All-under-Heaven, but the current rulers—such as King Xiang, Mencius's potential employer—are the major impediment to this goal. This tension permeates the entire text of the *Mencius*. Mencius at times appears highly optimistic: he moves from one court to another in search of a ruler who would heed his advice, trying to convince them—from powerful kings of Wei and Qi down to the lord of a tiny statelet of Teng 滕—that heeding him will enable them to become True Monarchs, i.e., eventual unifiers of All-under-Heaven (see below). Yet Mencius also repeatedly clashes with his patrons, bitterly criticizes them, and makes comments which undermine legitimacy of most if not all of current sovereigns. Having asserted in the passage above that “today among the shepherds of the people there is none who has no proclivity toward killing,” Mencius blames elsewhere the rulers engaged in aggressive warfare as “devourers of human flesh: a crime for which even death penalty is not enough” (4A14). Mencius's leading disciple, Wan Zhang 萬章, makes what appears as a logical conclusion from his Master's diatribes: he plainly denounces all the rulers of his age as “robbers,” demanding complete disengagement from them (5B4). This, however, is too radical a conclusion for Mencius, who appears unhappy with his disciple's sweeping judgment. For all his harsh criticism, Mencius remains a strong believer in a ruler-centered polity:

Mencius said: “It is not enough to criticize others; it is not enough to blame the government. Only the Great Man is able to rectify the wrongs in the ruler's heart. When the ruler is benevolent—everybody is benevolent; when the ruler is righteous—everybody is righteous; when the ruler is correct—everybody is correct. Just rectify the ruler and the state will be stabilized.” (4A20)

Mencius is clear: the ruler is not just a political but also a moral leader of his subjects. As such the ruler becomes indispensable not just in terms of his potential to bring about peace and stability to the entire subcelestial realm, but also in terms of realizing Mencius's moral project: creating a state in which everybody is benevolent and righteous. “Rectifying the wrongs in the ruler's heart” becomes then the thinker's noblest mission, which explains Mencius's endless movements across the competing Warring States in search of an appropriate employer.

Mencius's optimism with regard to improving the ruler's quality is represented in the ideal of the True Monarch (*wangzhe* 王者, literally, “he who acts as appropriate to the Monarch”).³ The True Monarch differs critically from the self-proclaimed “kings” (*wang* 王) of the Warring States world: unlike them he is supposed to equal the former paragons, such as the founders of the Shang 商 (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou 周 (ca. 1046–255 BCE) dynasties, and to reign over All-under-Heaven rather than a regional state. Mencius tries to convince his patrons that the goal of becoming True Monarch is attainable almost immediately. In a famous conversation with King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 (r. 319–301 BCE), Mencius explains that to attain

³The concept of the “True Monarch” is also represented by the verbal usage of the term *wang* 王 (to become the True Monarch, or to act as appropriate to the True Monarch).

universal rule the king just should expand his innate benevolence to ever broader cycles of subjects: “Treat your elders as elders, extending this to others’ elders; treat your young as young, extending this to others’ young, and you will hold All-under-Heaven in the palm of your hand!” (1A7). Elsewhere, the thinker provides a clearer blueprint to the ideal of “benevolent government” (*renzheng* 仁政) through which universal superiority is attainable:

Mencius said: “Respect the worthy, employ the able, and let the outstanding talents to occupy office: then all the men-of-service under Heaven will rejoice and want to be placed at your court. Do not impose levies on markets shops; deal [with goods] according to the law, but do not [levy] the shops: then all the merchants under Heaven will rejoice and want to store [their goods] at your markets. At the passes, check [the goods] but do not collect levies; then all the travelers under Heaven will rejoice and want to pass through your roads. Impose work obligations on the tillers but do not tax them: then all the peasants under Heaven will rejoice and want to till your fields. When there will be no monetary tax on the shops, then all the people under Heaven will rejoice and want to settle in your [country]. If one is really able to implement the five of these, then the people of neighboring states would look at him as their parent. To lead one’s children to attack their parent: from the time the people were born, such an undertaking had never succeeded. If so, you will have no rivals under Heaven. He who has no rivals under Heaven is the Heaven’s appointee. If so, one cannot but become the True Monarch. (2A5)

The bottom line of becoming the True Monarch, i.e., Mencius’s expectation that the people from All-under-Heaven would never fight the ruler who implements economically and socially advantageous policies on his soil is clearly a wishful thinking. Yet idealism aside, when Mencius’s concrete recommendations are concerned, they appear quite realistic. Similar economic, social, and cultural recommendations are repeated throughout the text whenever the True Monarch is discussed. The aspiring True Monarch should provide adequate subsistence and moral education to his subjects (1A7, 3A3); take care even of the weakest members of society (1B5); and imbue the entire society with moral values (6B4). It is expected that these policies will allow the incumbent monarch to attain the hearts of the people as the major precondition for attaining universal rule (1B4, 4A9). One may question of course the economic or social rationale of some of Mencius’s proposals, but none of these appear untenable, nor do they require extraordinary efforts on the ruler’s behalf.

Yet it is in light of these relatively down-to-earth demands of the future True Monarch that one can fully understand Mencius’s frustration with the fact that none of his employers had seriously moved toward their implementation. This frustration, which fueled many of the thinker’s resignations and his demarches against the patrons, is fully visible in one of Mencius’s most famous statements:

Once in five hundred years, a True Monarch is certain to arise; while in the interim there certainly will be some who determine the destiny of the generation.⁴ From the [establishment of the] Zhou, there have been already seven centuries; judging from this count, the [expected coming of the Monarch] has already passed; but if we analyze the timely [condi-

⁴Following YANG Bojun (*Mengzi yizhu* 1992: 110n3), I read 名世 as 命世. Csikszentmihalyi (2004: 195n65) discusses these characters, which he prefers to translate as “to give names to the age.”

tions], it is still possible. Yet Heaven does not want to order All-under-Heaven; should it want to order All-under-Heaven, who will cast me aside in our generation? (2B13)

Here, all of a sudden, the True Monarch turns from an attainable goal into an almost illusory figure: a long-awaited savior who arrives twice in a millennium, and whose time of arrival is long overdue. Mencius is desperate: the savior does not come, nor does anybody call upon him to determine “the destiny of the generation.” Yet personal implications aside, let us think of political ones. If the coming of the True Monarch is an exceptional event, does this mean that the thinker’s relentless efforts to better his employers en route to becoming the True Monarch were in vain? That, *pace* Mencius’s occasional optimism, one should not expect an average monarch to attain the degree of benevolence required by the thinker? And if so, should not one look for alternative means of placing the best possible candidate on the ruler’s throne?

Indeed, Mencius may have shared this dissatisfaction with regular means of bettering the monarch. Hence, his text is exceptionally rich with discussions about non-hereditary power transfer (cp. Pines 2009: 54–81; Kim 2019). His impatience with regard to some of the employers erupts all of a sudden. When King Xuan of Qi asks him about high ministers, Mencius replies that whenever the ruler does not heed the minister’s remonstrance, the latter should leave him; but if the minister comes from the ruling lineage, he may replace the sovereign (5B9). This is not a slip of the tongue: Mencius hints elsewhere that a malfunctioning ruler either does not deserve progeny (which effectively means the dynasty’s cessation; 1A4; cf. Pines 2013a: 83), or should be outright replaced as any malfunctioning official (1B6). The possibility of a ruler’s replacement is voiced by Mencius directly during another exchange with King Xuan:

King Xuan of Qi asked: “Did it happen that Tang [the founder of Shang] expelled Jie [the last ruler of the preceding Xia dynasty], while King Wu [the de-facto founder of the Zhou dynasty] attacked [the last Shang ruler] Zhòu?”

Mencius replied: “This is reported in the *Traditions*.”

[The king] said: “Is it permissible that a minister murders his ruler?”

Mencius said: “One who commits crimes against benevolence is called ‘criminal’; one who commits crimes against righteousness is called ‘a cruel one.’ A cruel and criminal person is called ‘an ordinary fellow.’ I heard that an ordinary fellow Zhòu was punished, but did not hear of murdering a ruler.” (1B8)

The topic of righteous rebellion was part and parcel of the political discourse of the Warring States period, but nowhere is the support for the right to rebel stated as unequivocally as in the *Mencius* (Pines 2008). In marked difference from most other thinkers who approved of rebellion only under truly exceptional circumstances, such as those associated with the paradigmatic overthrows of evil tyrants, Jie 桀 and Zhòu 紂, Mencius refers here to routine violations of the norms of benevolence and righteousness as sufficient justification to rebel and execute the culprit. Any reader of Mencius’s philippics against contemporary rulers will not fail to notice that these rulers are equally guilty in his eyes as offenders against benevolence and

righteousness. What practical conclusion then can come from this analysis? Should contemporary rulers face replacement and execution just like the past tyrants? And if so, who will decide upon such an execution? Most remarkably, Mencius fails to mention Heaven (which as we shall see below is attributed elsewhere in *Mencius* with important political tasks) as a major factor behind the demise of Jie and Zhòu. Who will then decide about replacing the tyrants? Once, as in an earlier citation, Mencius assigns this task to the ruler's closest kin (5B9). Alternatively, he insists that the support of the people below plays the crucial role in determining ruler's success and failure (4A9). Yet it is not up to the people to decide when to move against the culprit (cf. Tiwald 2008; Kim 2019: 128–137). This task should be initiated by Mencius's fellow *shi*, men-of-service:

Mencius said: To await for King Wen and only then to rise up, is [the behavior] of common folk. As for the truly outstanding *shi*, even if there is no King Wen, they would rise up. (7A10)

The latter statement is usually interpreted as hinting at a positive moral impact of a ruler like King Wen; the term *xing* (興 “to arise,” “to rise up”) is glossed as “to be moved and inspired.”⁵ This interpretation is not necessarily correct, however. Those who waited for King Wen to stand up were participants in his rebellion against the Shang king Zhòu (which was the single most important activity of King Wen). It seems that Mencius calls upon outstanding men-of-service to rise up even without a glorious leader such as King Wen. If my interpretation is correct, Mencius may appear as almost a revolutionary, a person who calls upon fellow *shi* to arise and put an end to Zhòu's current counterparts. Yet elsewhere, Mencius appears fearful of such a conclusion. When Wan Zhang questions the legitimacy of the current rulers, Mencius cautions him: “Do you think that if the True Monarch appears he would uniformly punish the current regional lords?” (5B4). The answer is clear: punishing the rulers is not something that a man-of-service—even an outstanding one like Wan Zhang—has the right to decide upon.

Mencius's equivocal attitude—once in favor of rebellion, and even hinting at the right of outstanding men-of-service to take hold of the state's destiny and rise up, once cautioning against this—is reflected in his view of another means of non-hereditary power transfer, namely, the ruler's abdication. By Mencius's life-time the idea that a good ruler should abdicate in favor of a worthy minister—as was allegedly done by the sage Thearch Yao 堯 in favor of Shun 舜, and later by Shun in favor of his own minister, Yu 禹—gained considerable popularity, as demonstrated in several of the recently unearthed manuscripts (Pines 2005; cf. Allan 2015). Mencius appears at times as a strong endorser of this idea: thus he repeatedly hails Yao and Shun as a model pair of a ruler and a minister. For instance:

⁵Cited from ZHU Xi's gloss in *Mengzi jizhu* 2001 13:352; for similar glosses by ZHAO Qi (趙岐, d. 201 C.E.) and SUN Shi (孫奭, 962–1033 CE), see *Mengzi zhengyi* 1991 13: 2765a. This interpretation was successful enough to permit this passage to be retained in the abridged version of the *Mencius* (*Mengzi jiewen* 1988 7:1006), which the Ming founder, ZHU Yuanzhang's 朱元璋 (1328–1398) ordered to purge of potentially “subversive” sayings (see Elman 2000: 80–81; Yang 2002).

As for Yao's attitude toward Shun, he ordered nine of his sons to serve [Shun], married two of his daughters to him, he provided the hundred officials, oxen and sheep, granaries and storehouses to feed Shun amidst the fields. Later he raised him and gave him the highest position. Hence it is said that kings and lords respect the worthies. (5B6)

Elevation of an erstwhile commoner, Shun, to the position of supreme authority is presented here as a normal, and even a normative way of conduct (cf. 3B4). Mencius's repeated praise of Shun may suggest the thinker's self-identification with this model minister; and it would not be too bold to assume that Mencius might have expected to find an enlightened monarch who would elevate him to the position of supreme authority on a par with Shun. Yet it was during Mencius's life-time (just when he was at the peak of his career at the court of Qi) that a real abdication took place in the neighboring state of Yan 燕 in 314 BCE. That abdication ended in a disaster: Yan became engulfed in a civil war and was nearly exterminated; the idea of abdication resultantly became irreparably sullied (Pines 2005: 268–271). Possibly under the impact of these events (Li 2003) Mencius had qualified his erstwhile support of Yao's abdication and adopted a more cautious stance. His uneasiness with this topic is seen from his other conversations with Wan Zhang 萬章:

Wan Zhang asked: "Did it really happen that Yao granted All-under-Heaven to Shun?"

Mencius said: "No, the Son of Heaven cannot grant anybody All-under-Heaven."

"Nonetheless, Shun possessed All-under-Heaven. Who granted it to him?"

[Mencius] said: "Heaven granted it."

"That Heaven granted it, does it mean that it earnestly ordered him so?"

[Mencius] said: "No, Heaven does not speak. It clarified [its intent] through conduct and through sacrifices."

[Wan Zhang] said: "What does it mean 'clarified through conduct and through sacrifices?'"

[Mencius] said: "The Son of Heaven can recommend a person to Heaven, but cannot force Heaven to grant this person All-under-Heaven; a regional lord can recommend a person to the Son of Heaven, but cannot force the Son of Heaven to grant this person the rank of a regional lord; a noble can recommend a person to the regional lord, but cannot force the lord to grant this person a noble rank. In the past, Yao recommended Shun to Heaven, and Heaven accepted him; he displayed Shun to the people, and the people accepted him; hence I said: 'Heaven does not speak. It clarified [its intent] through conduct and through sacrifices.'" (5A5)

Mencius is visibly annoyed by Wan Zhang's preoccupation with the issue of abdication, and employs different rhetorical tactics to thwart his disciple's barely veiled attack on the hereditary principle of rule. First, Mencius introduces Heaven's factor into power transfer to an extent unknown elsewhere in the Warring States-period texts, with the major exception of the *Mozi* 墨子.⁶ Heaven is introduced here as an active and sentient entity, which, albeit not speaking directly with its appointees,

⁶The *Mozi* is arguably the only text in the Warring States period that presents Heaven in a Western Zhou mode as a sentient and activist deity that punishes the culprits and rewards the meritorious, and the intent of which can be easily understood (see more in Standaert 2013). A few passages of *Mencius* echo *Mozi*, e.g., when the text speaks of Heaven's "desires" 天欲 (see, e.g., 3A7; 2B13). For the potential impact of *Mozi* on the *Mencius*'s views of Heaven, see Miyazaki 1963. For political role of Heaven in *Mozi* and *Mencius*, see also Luo and Pines 2023.

intervenes in human affairs and determines who should inherit the position of Son of Heaven. This invocation of Heaven, however, is a risky strategy in the age of marked decline in belief in Heaven's political potency, as exemplified in the ironic question by Wan Zhang "does it mean that it earnestly ordered [Shun to ascend the throne]?" Hence while symbolically placing Heaven at the center of his argument, Mencius redirects the discussion from Heaven to men:

[Wan Zhang] said: "What does it mean 'recommended to Heaven, and Heaven accepted him; displayed to the people, and the people accepted him?'"

[Mencius] said: "[Yao] ordered [Shun] to preside over sacrifices, and the hundred spirits accepted the offerings: this means that Heaven accepted him. He ordered [Shun] to preside over the people's affairs and the hundred clans were at peace under him: this means that the people accepted him. Heaven granted him [All-under-Heaven], the people granted him; hence I said: the Son of Heaven cannot grant anybody All-under-Heaven." (5A5)

Mencius boldly proclaims the importance of the people's support. Paying due respect to Shun's ability to let the spirits enjoy his offerings, he clarifies that it is the people's acceptance of Shun as a true leader which really mattered. He further explains:

Shun acted as Yao's chancellor for twenty-eight years: it is not something that a human effort can bring about, it is Heaven. When Yao passed away, at the end of the three-year mourning, Shun escaped to the South of the River to avoid Yao's son. Yet when the lords from All-under-Heaven arrived at court, they did not approach Yao's son, but Shun; those who had litigations did not approach Yao's son, but approached Shun; those who sang praises did not sing praises of Yao's son, but of Shun. Hence I said: it is Heaven. Only then did [Shun] return to the Central State and ascend the throne of the Son of Heaven. Should he live in Yao's palace and oppress Yao's son, this would mean usurpation, not the grant of Heaven. The Great Oath says: 'Heaven sees through the people's seeing, Heaven hears through the people's hearing.' It is said about this. (5A5)

The people appear, along with Heaven, as the second major factor behind Shun's success. Similarly, as Mencius explains elsewhere, it was the people's action that failed Yu's appointed successor, Yi 益, and allowed Yu's son, Qi 啓, to seize power (5A6). Yet despite his repeated invocations of "the people" as king-makers, Mencius is reluctant to turn them into the single major factor behind power transfer. To avoid the potentially subversive implications of his statements, Mencius reinterprets the abdication legend in the way that makes Yao's posthumous yielding of the throne into an exceptional event with minimal relevance to the present. The theretofore unheard of story of Shun's futile attempt to avoid Yao's son and to prevent the loss of power by Yao's family is particularly interesting.⁷ This presentation of Shun's behavior indicates that the latter considered hereditary transmission of power as singularly correct (for a different interpretation, see Kim 2019: 64–75).

Mencius's attempt to prevent the abdication legend from becoming a tool to subvert the ruler-centered order is explicit in his introduction of the third crucial factor

⁷Elsewhere Mencius, like the "Yao dian," which he cites, strongly rejects the idea that Yao abdicated in favor of Shun during Yao's lifetime and emphasizes that Shun replaced Yao only after the latter's death (5A4).

that allowed abdications to succeed in the past: the ruler's recommendation. Whereas in the passage cited above Yao's recommendation to Heaven to appoint Shun is mentioned only briefly, in the next dialogue with Wan Zhang, which focuses on the establishment of hereditary transmission at the beginning of the Xia dynasty, the issue of recommendation becomes as crucial as Heaven's support itself. The dialogue starts with Wan Zhang's provocative question: "People have a saying: 'By the time of Yu, virtue had declined; [hence] he did not transfer the power to the worthiest, but to his own son.' Do you agree?" (5A6). This prompts Mencius's more concentrated effort to defend legitimacy of hereditary power-transfer. After explaining the failure of Yu's righteous minister, Yi, to inherit from his master due to the shortness of his tenure as Yu's aide, and due to the worthiness of Yu's son, Qi, Mencius continues:

Shun, Yu, and Yi: the length of time that separated [their ministerial tenures from their enthronement], as well as the worthiness or unworthiness of their sons—all this was [arranged by] Heaven, it is not something human beings are capable of. When nobody acts, but the action is performed: this is Heaven. When nobody delivers [the power], but it arrives: this is the Decree. For a commoner to possess All-under-Heaven, he must be virtuous as Shun and Yu and also have the Son of Heaven to recommend him; hence Zhongni (Confucius) did not possess All-under-Heaven. (5A6)

In this passage, Mencius moderates the inherent radicalism of his earlier interpretation of the abdication legend. First, Heaven's support is manifested in one's longevity in tenure as well as in the aptitude of the reigning ruler's son, and not primarily in the people's action, as implied earlier. Second, recommendation by the reigning ruler suddenly becomes the most important asset of the aspiring minister, overshadowing other factors. The failure of Confucius to "possess All-under-Heaven" was not due to his lack of popularity among the people or lack of Heaven's support, but simply because he lacked a supportive ruler. In the final account, it is solely the acting ruler's prerogative to decide to whom to transfer power, and the idea of yielding the throne is not supposed to undermine the absolute power of the sovereign. Mencius concludes with Confucius's alleged quote: "Tang (=Yao) and Yu (=Shun) abdicated; Xia, Yin (=Shang), and Zhou transmitted [power] lineally; the meaning [or appropriateness] of their [action] is the same" (5A6).

Mencius's views regarding nonhereditary means of placing a worthy ruler on the throne represent, therefore, a curious amalgam of radicalism and caution. On the one hand, he appears as the only thinker who tries to draw universally applicable conclusions from the overthrow of the Xia and the Shang, moving dangerously in the direction of legitimating rebellion by "outstanding *shi*" against an immoral tyrant. On the other hand, he explicitly distances himself from his disciple Wan Zhang, whose provocative support for either rebellion or abdication we noted above, and clarifies that dynastic succession is the entirely legitimate mode for fixing on a ruler. Like all the other thinkers, Mencius did not present any practical alternative to the hereditary principle of rule, and his audacity—while annoying and even

frightening to later rulers—remained without immediate political consequences.⁸ This left the thinker with an unenviable choice of trying in vain to improve the quality of the sovereigns, who remained unworthy of his efforts.

3 Between the Ruler and the Way: Mencius on Men of Service

Mencius's multiple dialogues with the rulers reflect a somewhat contradictory attitude. At times the thinker is polite, understanding, and encouraging, while at times is haughty and confrontational; first he seeks employment and then departs amid strong demarches. These highly divergent modes of interaction with the rulers are reflective not only of Mencius's complex personality but rather of a deeper challenge he faced. Like his fellow men-of-service, Mencius had to navigate his way between the competing commitments to the rulers he wanted to serve and to his principles, the Way (*Dao* 道), he wanted to preserve. This predicament reflected the complex position of the *shi* stratum, to which Mencius belonged and which he aspired to lead: the stratum of proud men-of-service who remained forever dependent on the power-holders.

The *shi* were originally a politically and intellectually marginal social group, the lowest segment of hereditary aristocracy. By the fifth-fourth century BCE, as the pedigree-based aristocratic order gave way to a more mobile and meritocratic society, the *shi* evolved into a new broad elite of men-of-service, which encompassed both former aristocrats and a certain amount of ambitious commoners who made their way up the social ladder (Pines 2009: 115–123). Mencius's paragon, Confucius, was the first to position himself as a spiritual leader of this rising stratum, and Mencius did his best to inherit this mantle. Although politically speaking Mencius appears as a conservative supporter of hereditary office-holding (1B5, 3A3, 1B7),⁹ culturally speaking he clearly identifies himself with the *shi* and acts as their spokesman. His pronouncements reflect an immense pride in his *shi* identity: “Only a *shi* is able to preserve a stable heart without stable livelihood” (1A7). “A *shi* with high aspirations will never forget [that he may end] in a ditch, will never forget [that he may] lose his head” (3B1; 5B7). One of Mencius's disciples adds, provocatively: “[as for] *shi* with abundant virtue, rulers were unable to turn them into subjects, fathers were unable to turn them into sons” (5A4). Bravado aside, these statements

⁸ Later, however, some rulers clearly viewed the *Mencius* as a subversive text. For ZHU Yuanzhang's indignation with the content of the *Mencius* and his decree to edit out “subversive” passages, see Elman 2000: 78–88.

⁹ Mencius's support of hereditary office-holding is quite odd in light of the overwhelming commitment of competing thinkers of his age to the principles of meritocracy (Pines 2013b). The reasons for this odd stance are not clear: they may reflect peculiarities in social system of the state of Qi and its neighbors, where most of Mencius's career passed; or rather they reflect his genuine fear that dismissal of hereditary rights will undermine the importance of kinship ties (see e.g., 1B7).

reflect Mencius's and his disciples' strong sense of belonging to a proud and brave *shi* community, united by common behavioral norms, the members of which did not feel inferior to rulers. Mencius explains the reasons for this pride:

Zengzi said: "The richness of Jin and Chu cannot be matched; [but] while they have their riches, I have my benevolence; while they have their ranks, I have my righteousness: so am I lesser than they?" Could Zengzi say anything inappropriate? There may be a certain Way there. There are three matters that command respect under Heaven: first is rank, second is age; third is virtue. At court, rank is supreme; in the village community, age; but in supporting the generation and prolonging the people's [life], nothing is comparable to virtue. How would a possessor of one of these behave arrogantly toward a possessor of the second? Hence the ruler who has great plans must have a minister who cannot be summoned; if he wants to make plans together [with the minister], he must approach the minister. (2B2)

Mencius outlines here three parallel hierarchies: a political-administrative one, with the ruler at its apex; a social one (confined to small communities), which prizes age; and a moral hierarchy in which he and his like occupy the leading position.¹⁰ While politically inferior to the ruler, outstanding men-of-service are morally superior to the sovereign, and their relations should be therefore based on mutual respect, which diminishes hierarchic distinctions. This proud stance implies that a true man-of-service should serve the ruler primarily as a means of moral self-realization rather than just for filling in his belly.

Yet the situation on the ground was more complex than the above declaration implies. Their pride aside, the men-of-service remained forever dependent on the rulers both politically and economically. Worse, Mencius's view of service as primarily the means of the intellectual's self-realization was not shared by everybody. Some of his contemporaries openly postulated that making career for the sake of fame and riches is entirely legitimate. On the opposite side there were voices of those who considered serving the rulers as a filthy matter, and advocated complete disengagement from the courts (Pines 2009: 136–163). It is against this complex backdrop that Mencius had to chart the course for like-minded lofty men-of-service. Establishing the middle way between shameless career-seekers on the one hand and the purists on the other was an arduous task which generated multiple tensions. These tensions transpire throughout the text.

Mencius often appears as fully committed to the idea of serving the ruler as the supreme goal of a man-of-service. To serve is the natural self-fulfillment of a *shi*; if he remains without an employer for just 3 months he should be consoled (3B3). Mencius's life-long search for a proper appointment fully manifests his commitment to political career. Yet the service is emphatically not the goal in itself; it should not come at the expense of an intellectual's mission and his self-esteem. Mencius clarifies these points in reply to a disciple's query "Under what conditions did the noble men of old times serve?"

Three [conditions] caused them to approach [the ruler] and three to abandon him. If [the ruler] welcomed them with the utmost respect and ritual politeness, saying that he was going to implement their words, they approached him. When polite appearances were still kept, but the words were not implemented, they left him. Second, even if he was not going

¹⁰Cf. 6A16 in which "Heaven's ranks" (one's morality) are juxtaposed to "human ranks."

to implement their words, but welcomed them with the utmost respect and ritual politeness, they approached him; when polite appearances faded, they left him. When they ate neither in the morning nor in the evening, starving so as to be unable to leave their compound, and the ruler, hearing this, said: "At large, I am unable to implement their Way and am also unable to follow their words, but if I let them die of starvation in my lands, it will be shameful to me," sending them provisions, they accepted them, just to avoid death. (6B4)

The three reasons to hold an office outlined by Mencius may serve as a useful guide for his own behavior. Ideally, a noble man should serve the ruler in order to implement his Way, but if this is not immediately possible, one can stay in the vicinity of the ruler in exchange for the latter's respect and politeness. Finally, if he is in desperate economic condition, a noble man may accept the ruler's financial support as a matter of survival. What is remarkable, however, is that while discussing the conditions to serve, Mencius felt it necessary to outline immediately the conditions for resignation. Service is a normative state of affairs, but it should never turn into shameless career-seeking.

Two questions haunt Mencius: when to serve and when to resign (cf. Fang 2010). There is no singularly correct course. Hence, among the sages of the past there were some, like Boyi 伯夷, who refused to serve unworthy rulers and compromise their integrity, but also those like Liuxia Hui 柳下惠, who would humbly accept any office, or Yi Yin 伊尹, an advisor to King Tang, the founder of the Shang dynasty, who, pitying the common folk deprived of worthy rule, "undertook the heaviest task of All-under-Heaven," endlessly seeking office to fulfill his duty. Mencius considers each of these sages worthy of emulation, although he is slightly critical of Boyi's extreme purity and of Liuxia Hui's apparent lack of self-respect. However, his true hero is Confucius, one who knew "when to hurry, and when to wait, when to stay and when to serve"—a person who combined the advantages of earlier sages, surpassing them all.¹¹ Mencius explains the reasons behind Confucius' fluctuation between the desire to serve and his repeated resignations (a course closely followed by Mencius himself): "The ancients always desired to serve but hated to do it not in accordance with their Way. To approach [the ruler] not in accordance with the Way is like 'cutting holes' [for men and women to meet each other secretly instead of becoming properly engaged]" (3B3).

Mencius is anxious to distinguish himself from those contemporaneous politicians who made their enviable career by becoming servile yes-men of the rulers. As an alternative, Mencius puts forward an ideal of the Great Man, the one who maintains personal integrity against all the odds:

To consider compliance as correctness is the way of spouses and concubines. [The Great Man] lives in the broad lodging of All-under-Heaven, occupies a proper position in All-under-Heaven, follows the great Way of All-under-Heaven. When his aspirations are fulfilled, he follows [the Way] together with the people; when they are not, he follows his Way alone. Wealth and high status cannot tempt him, poverty and low status cannot move him, awesomeness and military might cannot subdue him—this is called the "Great Man." (3B2)

¹¹ For Mencius's discussions of the former sages, see 5A7, 5B1, 6B6 and 2A2 (in the latter, the superiority of Confucius is proclaimed).

The Great Man is an entirely self-sufficient person, a proud counterpart of the ruler above and the people below. Being internally empowered by firm attachment to the Way, he is able to defy whatever external challenges are presented by those who want either to entice or overawe him. The Great Man is almost superhuman: he is not a minor actor on the sociopolitical scene, but a creator of his own moral universe, to which he can retreat from the inadequate outside world. This moral universe, as Mencius clarifies elsewhere, is not desolate, but rather is inhabited by aspiring Great Men—good men-of-service:

Mencius told Wan Zhang: “Good men-of-service of a village should befriend good men-of-service of the village; good men-of-service of a state should befriend good men-of-service of the state; good men-of-service of All-under-Heaven should befriend good men-of-service of All-under-Heaven. If befriending good men-of-service of All-under-Heaven is still insufficient, then you still can debate with the ancients. Recite their *Poems*, read their *Documents*: is it possible that then you will not understand these people? Thus when you discuss their generation, this is as if you befriend them.” (5B8)

The picture of a community of friends who share aspirations and educational background (which allows them also to debate with “the ancients”) supplements logically the notion of a self-sufficient Great Man. This synchronic and diachronic community, being apparently independent of the state and its hierarchy, may have been particularly appealing to critically minded people like Wan Zhang, whose despise of current rulers was mentioned above. And yet promulgation of this ideal of self-sufficient community of good men-of-service does not mean that Mencius abandons the goal of service altogether. When confronted by the purists who proclaim the advantages of reclusion he defends his commitment to service in a less-than-ideal world. The recluses, such as CHEN Zhongzi 陳仲子, a member of the ruling lineage in Qi, who retreated from public life in protest against his brother’s filthy manners, deserve respect, but they have gone too far. Absolute purity is attainable only to an earthworm. In the world of human beings, by contrast, the very nature of economic interaction brings everybody into contact with people whose decency is unverifiable. In this situation the purists’ insistence à la Boyi on not eating the “contaminated” grains of unjust rulers is simply not feasible (3B10).

CHEN Zhongzi’s way is a dead-end, whereas being a ruler’s servile yes-man is demeaning. The difficulty to navigate one’s course, to distinguish oneself from shameless “petty men” and from self-defeating purists generates persistent tensions. These tensions may explain some of Mencius’s affronts to his employers. Perhaps by stunning the rulers with acerbic remarks and bitter criticism on the verge of outright subversion (Pines 2013a), Mencius tried to prove to fellow lofty *shi* that he does not compromise his principles for the sake of career. But Mencius’s haughty stance vis-à-vis the sovereigns is not just bravado: rather it reflects his firm belief, noticed above, in the moral and intellectual superiority of the outstanding men of service over the power-holders. This superiority counterbalances the political superiority of the rulers creating a parity between the monarch and his aide. This sense of parity is proclaimed by Mencius unequivocally in another conversation with King Xuan of Qi:

If a ruler treats his subjects as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a mere fellow. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as a mortal enemy. (4B3)

The ruler cannot rely on automatic loyalty and obedience of his subject: the situation rather is that of *quid pro quo*, in which the sovereign never gets more than he gives. This statement is radical enough, but elsewhere Mencius goes one step further:

Lord Mu [of Lu] went several times to visit Zisi, asking him: “In antiquity, how did [the rulers] of a one-thousand-chariot [that is, small] state manage to befriend *shi*?” Zisi did not like that, answering: “Men of antiquity had a saying, ‘talk of service’; did they say ‘talk of friendship?’” As Zisi did not like [the lord’s question], why did he not answer: “Judging by position, you are the ruler, and I am the minister—how dare I befriend a ruler? Judging by virtue (*de* 德), you serve me—how can you befriend me?” (5B7)

This short passage epitomizes the complexity of Mencius’s approach. While recognizing the ruler’s political superiority, Mencius emphasizes that intellectually and morally a man-of-service, or at least an outstanding man-of-service, such as Confucius’s grandson, Zisi 子思 (ca. 481–402 BCE), is the ruler’s superior. The last sentence, which postulates the inadequacy of the ruler’s *de*, creates a potentially explosive situation. As Mencius and his disciples knew perfectly, the term *de* meant not only moral virtue but also referred to charismatic power, or, in other words, to the very right to rule (Onozawa 1968; Kryukov 1995; Martynov 1998). Thus if a minister had superior *de*, and the ruler was supposed to “serve” (*shi* 事) him, this effectively meant that the sovereign and his underling should shift their positions!

Mencius’s haughtiness backfired. Even in a lenient atmosphere of the Warring States period his affronts to the rulers could not endear him to the employers. Although the lords of his age—such as King Xuan of Qi—appear to be tolerant enough toward Mencius’s criticism, they eventually distanced themselves from him, annulling his actual impact on their policies. Frustrated, Mencius famously lamented the lack of the True Monarch (see above); elsewhere he opined that the career does not top his priorities. In the last chapters of the *Mencius* several statements repeat the thinker’s alternative message: “I turn toward myself and [attain] internal completeness (or integrity, *cheng* 誠). There is no joy greater than that” (7A4).

This latter saying exemplifies a crucial “turning inward” in Mencius’s thought. Leaving aside its philosophical significance, let us focus on its political implications. When a thinker who has dedicated most of his life to wandering among the competing courts and persuading the rulers and their aides suddenly declares that he would just “preserve his heart/mind and nourish his nature” (7A1), enjoying primarily the “turning toward oneself,” this means abandonment or at least radical downgrading of political aspirations. From a purely political point of view, Mencius failed to establish sustainable norms of a ruler’s relations with men-of-service eager to preserve their dignity at court. It was up to Mencius’s major critic, Xunzi 荀子 (d. after 238 BCE) to outline a more viable mode of ruler-minister interactions and rules of political engagement for the men-of-letters in general (Pines 2002: 68–71). Yet in terms of bolstering the pride of intellectuals throughout the imperial millennia and beyond, Mencius finds few if any competitors.

4 Weak Roots: Mencius on the People

In one of his most famous statements, Mencius declares:

The people are the most esteemed; the altars of soil and grain follow them, and the ruler is the lightest. Hence one who attains [the support of] the multitudes, becomes Son of Heaven; one who attains [the support of] the Son of Heaven, becomes a regional lord; one who attains [the support of] the regional lord, becomes a noble. (7B14)

This statement, which assigns the people an extraordinarily important political role, epitomizes the idea of “the people as a root” of the polity (*minben* 民本). This is one of the core ideas in the *Mencius* and, broader, in pre-imperial Chinese thought in general (Pines 2009: 187–214; Zhang 2009). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, and even more in the recent decades, the *minben* idea attracted considerable interest in the context of discussions about compatibility of Confucianism with Western democratic ideals.¹² Putting its modern implications aside, one may immediately notice that while Mencius’s focus on “the people” as potential king-makers and as the *raison d’être* of the polity is not exceptional in the intellectual landscape of the Warring States period, his people-oriented pronouncements sound more resolute and more radical than in most other texts. Yet before we declare Mencius as the champion of the “people’s power” (Xu 2006: 137–140; Qiang 2013: 152–153), one should consider the complexity of his approach, which does not fit neatly into modern political categories.

There is no doubt that Mencius is fully committed to the idea of government “for the people.” Ensuring the subjects’ decent livelihood is the ruler’s paramount responsibility; the hallmark of “benevolent government.” Lenient taxation, allotting every farmer an adequate plot of land, eschewing mobilization during agriculturally hot seasons, preserving ecological balance: all these are the core features of Mencius’s political ideal (e.g., 1A3, 1A7, 2A5). As noted above, these measures are essential for the aspiring True Monarch: they will generate enthusiastic support for his policies at home and abroad, causing the people to “go over to him like water runs downwards” (see below). This possibility of the people “voting with their feet” explains why the people-oriented policies are not just a moral desideratum: they are also fundamental to the government’s legitimacy:

[Kings] Jie and Zhòu lost All-under-Heaven through losing the people. They lost the people through losing their hearts. There is a way to attain All-under-Heaven: when you attain the people, you attain All-under-Heaven. There is a way to attain the people: when you attain their hearts, you attain the people. There is a way to attain their hearts: gather them at what they desire, do not do whatever they detest, and that is all. The people turn to benevolence just as water flows downwards and animals head for the wilds. (4A9)

This insistence on the importance of “attaining the people’s hearts” is the second pillar of Mencius’s people-oriented thought. This idea, again, reflects a broad

¹²For early explorations of the potential relevance of the *minben* idea to modern democracy, see LIANG Qichao (Liang 1922[1996]: 35–44 and 228–234); for modern debates among Western scholars, see, e.g., Murthy 2000; Tan 2003: 132–156.

consensus of the Warring States-period thinkers (Pines 2009: 203–210), yet Mencius expresses it more forcefully than most of his contemporaries. The declared importance of the public mood and public opinion for the government’s legitimacy may indeed create an impression that Mencius was on the verge of moving from the idea of the government “for the people” to that of “by the people.” Yet before we jump to this conclusion let us ask: how should the people’s will be ascertained? Surely “voting by their feet” is a powerful expression of public opinion, but this is by definition an exceptional case. What about regular procedures of consultation? Here the *Mencius* remains curiously silent. The only time the direct input of “the people” into policy-making is discussed is when Mencius recommends the ruler to solicit the opinions of capital-dwellers (*guoren* 國人) (aside from the ruler’s entourage and the nobles) before deciding on major promotions, demotions, and executions (1B7). Yet even in that passage there is no clarity about how exactly these consultations should be done.

Is this the issue of a minor negligence by a thinker who was after all not much interested in institution-building? I doubt so. Rather, Mencius’s emphasis on the importance of public opinion coexisted with a strongly pronounced dislike of the commoners’ direct intervention in policy-making. This dislike is expressed most directly in Mencius’s polemics with XU Xing 許行, a proponent of radical agricultural equality, who urged the rulers to till the soil to avoid exploiting the peasants. Mencius is outraged by this subversion of social hierarchy and clarifies his stance:

Some toil with their hearts, some toil with their force. Heart-toilers rule men; force-toilers are ruled by men. Those who are ruled by men, feed men; those who rule men, are fed by men—this is the common propriety of All-under-Heaven. (3A4)

Mencius explains elsewhere:

Without the noble men, nobody will rule the commoners; without the commoners, nobody will feed the noble men. (3A4)¹³

These statements are the clearest exposition of Mencius’s sociopolitical ideal. Society is based on a separation of functions between the rulers and the ruled; and the hierarchy is both moral and social. In polemic against XU Xing Mencius was particularly appalled by his opponent’s degradation of noble men who were encouraged to till the soil; but his indignation is equally applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the notion of elevating commoners to the position of active participants in politics. We face therefore a paradoxical situation: the thinker who is most committed to heeding the people’s opinion is also the most unequivocally opposed to allow the people political participation in the first place!

What are the reasons for this paradoxical attitude? The most immediate answer would be Mencius’s disdainful attitude toward moral and intellectual abilities of “force-toilers.” Mencius declares:

¹³For “commoners” Mencius uses here the term *yeren* 野人, literally, the “people of the fields,” originally a designation of the subjugated population beyond the capital walls. For the changing position of *yeren* during the transition from the Springs-and-Autumns (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE) to the Warring States period, see Tian and Zang 1998: 167–172.

To act without understanding, to exercise without examination, to follow [the Way] throughout the entire life without understanding it: this is the way of multitudes. (7A5)

This statement unmistakably reminds of Confucius's dictum "You can let the people follow [the Way], but not understand it" (*Lunyu* 8.9).¹⁴ Yet Mencius goes even further in his disdain to the commoners' mental abilities. He proclaims:

Slight is the difference between men and beasts and birds. Commoners abandon it; noble men preserve it. (4B19)

This is an exceptionally harsh pronouncement which equals the commoners (*shu-min* 庶民) as a social category with beasts and birds. Understandably, this group is not supposed to participate in political processes. Although they are the root of the polity and the ultimate beneficiaries of the political order, the lower strata should remain forever segregated from decision-making. But how can this statement be reconciled with Mencius's emphasis on the need to educate the commoners (1A3, 1A7, 3A3)? And what about the thinker's repeated optimistic assertions that every man can become Yao and Shun (4B28, 6B2)? I think that the difference is between one's potential and its actualization. Potentially, everybody—more precisely ever male—can become a cultivated noble man en route to fully realizing his mental and moral potential. On the other hand, due to a variety of objective and subjective reasons, the majority of men—the commoners—do not actualize this potential. As such they do not deserve an active political role, at least not in the ordinary circumstances.

How can then we reconcile then Mencius's insistence on the people as "the most esteemed" with his disdain to commoners and rejection of their political participation? A possible answer will be the thinker's own statement: "only men-of-service can maintain a constant heart without constant livelihood. As for the people, if they lack constant livelihood, they lack constant heart; and if they lack constant heart, there is nothing which they will not do, in the way of unruliness, depravity, deviation, and excessiveness" (1A7). Namely, in the current less-than-perfect world only the men-of-service are able to preserve their innate morality intact. As such only they deserve the natural and exclusive right to participate in policy making. Moreover, it is their right and duty to speak on behalf of the depraved but ultimately guiltless commoners.

This last point allows me a sinister interpretation of Mencius's people-oriented discourse. Insofar as it was Mencius and other men-of-service who continued to represent the people in front of the rulers, invoking the masses' interests granted these intellectuals an additional leverage vis-à-vis the sovereigns. This appropriation of what Tu Wei-ming aptly defines as "the most generalizable social relevance (the sentiments of the people)" (Tu 1993: 20) by the members of the *shi* stratum was too important an asset to be yielded to the uneducated masses. It was in the best interest of the self-proclaimed champions of the people from among the educated elite to keep commoners precluded from political processes. If my, admittedly

¹⁴For debates around this sentence, see Pines 2009: 268n50.

speculative interpretation is correct, then, by emphasizing the people's importance, Mencius was simply serving his own stratum. The real power was to remain in the hands of men-of-service.

5 Conclusion: Impact of Mencius's Thought

Mencius is often dubbed an idealist. This definition is probably too sweeping: after all, the thinker did address a variety of practical issues, which he tried to solve (Kim 2010a, 2019). However, some idealistic undertones in his approaches to economic, social, and military issues are undeniable. His promises to even the weakest rulers that maintaining proper domestic order may compensate them for inadequacy of their armies (1A5, 1B14, 6B8) sound out of touch with realities of the Warring States world; and his prediction that he who is not benevolent would never attain All-under-Heaven (7B13) is clearly a wishful thinking. Mencius's uncompromising devotion to his principles made him an inconvenient minister; his advice was rarely heeded, and his influence on the political life of the Warring States period remained minuscule. Even under the unified empire, despite the official endorsement, Mencius's proposals did not become the dynasties' course of action. The thinker was much respected, but, just as in the Warring States period, not much taken to heart.

So, if we judge Mencius in terms of his practical impact on policy-makers, then he was surely a failure. Yet this judgment will be grossly unfair to him. The thinker's major success was, just like that of his Master, Confucius, in positioning himself as a spiritual leader of the men-of-service, and of their heirs, the imperial literati. His audacity, his moral integrity, his determination to convince power-holders of his truth, his immense self-respect, and his ability to position himself as a spokesman of the people below and the mentor of rulers above: all these deeply influenced the mind-set of the imperial intellectuals. Their position vis-à-vis the emperors was incomparably lower than that of Mencius: in the unified empire a dissenting man of letters could be humiliated, dismissed, incarcerated, or even executed. Yet the chillier the real atmosphere was, the stronger was the attraction to Mencius's example of a courageous fighter for "benevolence and righteousness" (Pines 2012: 76–103). For countless generations of the imperial intellectuals Mencius was the ultimate source of inspiration. As such, his career can be summarized to be a sort of success.

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