

# *Mencius*, Readings 1

## Persuasions to Rulers and Political Doctrines

### I. Introduction to Mencius and his career

The biographical elements of the *Mencius* – and there are more of these than in any other early Chinese text – are entirely related to Mencius’s career as a “wandering persuader” – a thinker who traveled among feudal courts seeking a ruler who would employ his political and ethical ideas and give Mencius some position of authority to implement them. Book 1 (both parts A and B), is generally taken to be a chronologically arranged set of snapshots of this endeavor.

The book opens with Mencius first meeting with King Hui of Liang (that is, the great state of Wei, whose capital was at Liang), who was the most powerful ruler of his day. The King was old when he met Mencius, about 325 B.C., but the King addresses Mencius as though he were older still, suggesting that at the start of his effort to travel in search of a ruler who would listen to his ideas, Mencius was already advanced in years.

**1A.1** Mencius appeared in audience before King Hui of Liang. The King said, “Aged Sir, you have not regarded a thousand li\* as too great a distance to travel here – surely it must be that you have come to profit (*li*) my state!”

Mencius replied, “Your Majesty, why must you speak of profit? Indeed, there is nothing but humanity (*ren*) and right (*yi*). If Your Majesty says, ‘Whereby may I profit by state?’ your grandees shall say, ‘Whereby may I profit my family?’ and your common people shall say, ‘Whereby may I profit myself?’ When those higher and lower compete with one another for profit, the state will be in danger. In a state of ten thousand war chariots, the man who assassinates the ruler will surely have a family estate of one thousand; in a state of one thousand war chariots, the man who assassinates the ruler will surely have a family estate of one hundred. Such men have a tenth share of the state’s force, and this is by no means a little. But if right is placed behind and profit before, they will never be satisfied unless they seize it all. Never has a man of humanity abandoned his parents, and never has a man of right put himself before his ruler.

“May Your Majesty simply speak of humanity and right. Why must you speak of profit?”

\* The phrase “a thousand li” uses a traditional measure of distance equivalent to  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a mile. The word ‘li’ is not italicized to avoid confusion with *li* (ritual) and *li* (profit).

As we saw in reading the *Analects*, the early Confucian masters seem to have warned their disciples against becoming overly involved in court politics, because of the dangers that visibility during an amoral age presented to moral people. Yet Mencius clearly violates that rule, and is one of very few Confucians to do so during the Warring States period. Part of his reason has to do with his particular interpretation of the doctrine of timeliness, which we’ll discuss in the fourth set of reading selections. An equally important reason is the mission he assumed as the defender of Confucianism against competing schools of thought. The *Mencius* chiefly names two of these: Mohism and the school of Yang Zhu, a thinker for whom we have almost no identified works, but who was associated with a self-regarding egoism that saw the individual’s chief obligation and satisfaction to lie in preservation of his or her body, health, and life.

1A.1 illustrates this aspect of Mencius's mission, since his remonstrance to the King focuses on the King's rather innocent use of the term *lì* – 'profit' – the chief value term of the Mohists, which Mencius pounces on like a cat hunting a rat. The following passage from Book 3 of the text, Mencius explains his defensive mission and his willingness to *argue* – something the *Analects* does not do, but which Mencius's adversaries the Mohists were skilled at. (The culture heroes referred to in the passage – Yao, Shun, Yu, King Wen, King Wu, the Duke of Zhou – are explained in the course Glossary.)

**3B.9** Mencius's disciple Gongduzi said, "Master, outsiders all say you are fond of disputation. What do you say to that?"

Mencius said, "How could I be fond of disputation? I just have no choice. The world has existed for a long time, now in order, now in chaos. In the time of Yao, the waters ran awry and flooded the central states; eels and dragons dwelt there and the people had no security. The people in the lowlands nested their homes on stilts; the people in the highlands dwelt in caves. The *Documents* says: 'The deluge sounded an alarm for us,' thereby referring to this flood. Yao sent Yu to control it. Yu cut channels through the land to guide the waters to the sea and drove the eels and dragons away into the marshlands. The water that springs from the earth formed the Yangzi, Huai, Han, and Yellow Rivers. As the danger receded and the harm from beasts subsided, people were at last able to build their homes on level soil.

"But after the deaths of Yao and Shun the *dao* of the sages declined and tyrants arose one after another. They leveled homes in order to create their pleasure ponds and the people had no place to rest. They took fields out of cultivation to create their pleasure parks and the people had no way to eat. And then there arose errant teachings and patterns of violent conduct. With the spread of parks, ponds, and lakes, wild birds and beasts returned, and by the time of the last Shang ruler Zhòu, the world was in chaos once again. The Duke of Zhou guided King Wu to execute Zhòu. He waged war against Yan for three years and punished its lord. He drove Fei Lian to the edge of the sea, and killed him there. Altogether, he annexed fifty states. He drove tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, and elephants to distant lands, and the people of the world were joyful. The *Documents* says, 'How gleaming, the plans of King Wen! And receiving them, King Wu's deeds shone bright. They enlighten and aid us of later days so we can keep to the upright without defect.'

"But each generation declined and the *dao* fell towards obscurity; errant teachings and patterns of violent conduct arose once again, until subjects were known who murdered their lords and children their fathers. Confucius was alarmed, and he created the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which records the state of affairs from the view of the Son of Heaven. This is why Confucius said, 'It will be on the basis of the *Annals* that I am known; it will be on the basis of the *Annals* that I am vilified.'

"But no sage king has arisen. The lords of the states act with abandon and gentlemen in retirement proclaim deviant doctrines. The words of Yang Zhu and Mozi fill the world such that those who do not preach the doctrines of Yang Zhu preach those of Mozi. The maxim of the Yangists is 'Each for himself,' a world of men without rulers; the maxim of the Mohists is 'Universal love,' a world of men without fathers. To know no father and no ruler – this is to be nothing but a beast. Zengzi's pupil Gongming said, 'When a ruler has rich meats in his kitchens and stables of fat horses while his people have the look of hunger and the starving drop dead in the wilds, he rules the beasts and eats men.' If the *daos* of the Yangists and Mohists don't cease and the *dao* of Confucius

is not clear to all, then deviant doctrines will deceive the people and *ren* and righteousness will be blocked out. To block out *ren* and righteousness is to rule the beasts and eat men, and the people will take to eating one another.

“This is why I am alarmed, and why I defend the *dao* of the past sages and confront Yangists and Mohists, driving out depraved speech so that errant doctrines will no longer flourish. ‘When they flourish in one’s heart, they infect one’s acts, when they flourish in one’s acts, they infect one’s governance’ – were a sage to arise once again, he would not change a single word of mine.

When reading the *Mencius*, it is useful to be aware that the text is as much a biography of a revered sage teacher as a philosophical work. Sometimes these two aspects become confused, largely because Mencius himself seems to have been an aggressive man whose behavior could get him into trouble, and the *Mencius* often seems busy trying to rationalize and defend his actions by means of ad hoc arguments – perhaps ones Mencius himself made – that are not always consistent with his more disinterested and reflective philosophical statements.

Book 2, which seems largely to be an account of years Mencius spent in the large eastern state of Qi, includes passages that illustrate this feature of the text, and that seem to introduce to us a truly lifelike portrait of Mencius the real man. In the two passages below, Mencius gets himself into trouble through his cavalier attitude towards the King – some scholars think that he was, in fact, forced to leave the state as a result.

**2B.2** Mencius was about to go to the King’s court when an envoy from the King arrived and conveyed this message from the King: “I was planning to pay you a visit, but I am suffering from a chill and cannot risk being out in the air. However, I will hold court this morning, and I wonder whether I will be able to see you there?”

Mencius replied, “Unfortunately, I am ill. I am unable to go to court.”

The following day, Mencius went to pay the Dongguo family a condolence call. Gongsun Chou said, “Yesterday, you excused yourself on account of illness. Wouldn’t it be ill advised to go on a visit of condolence today?”

Mencius said, “Yesterday I was ill, today I’m well. Why should I pay the call?”

The King sent an envoy to ask after Mencius’s illness with a doctor to examine him.

Meng Zhongzi responded to their arrival by saying, “When His Majesty’s command was given yesterday, my Master was ill and unable to attend court. Today he has improved a bit and has hurried off to the court, but I’m not sure whether his strength will allow him to complete the journey.” He then dispatched several men to intercept Mencius on the road and implore him not to return home, but to rush to court.

In the end, Mencius was forced to seek refuge for the night with the family of Jing Chou. Jing Chou said to him, “The most important relationships a man must maintain are that between father and son within the family, and that between a ruler and subject beyond it. The keystone of the former is generosity, of the latter, respect. I have seen the King show respect towards you; I have not observed you showing respect towards the King.”

Mencius said, “What sort of thing is that to say! No one else in Qi speaks to the King about *ren* and right. Could it be that they do not think these are worthy ideals? In their hearts they think, ‘How could he be worthy of being instructed in *ren* and righteousness.’ What disrespect could be greater than this? I would never presume to lay

before the King any teaching that was not according to the *dao* of Yao and Shun – there is no one in Qi who shows the King more respect than I!”

Jingzi said, “No, that’s not what I mean. According to the rites, ‘When one’s father summons, one should respond without even pausing to assent. When one’s ruler issues a summons, one responds without even waiting for one’s horse to be harnessed.’ You were preparing to go to court, but when the King’s summons came, you decided not to follow through. This would seem quite unlike what the rites prescribe.”

“How can you say such a thing?” said Mencius. “Zengzi said, ‘The rulers of Jin and Chu have wealth unequalled, but they may have it - I’ll take my *ren*. They may have their exalted rank, I’ll take my righteousness. In what way am I their inferior?’ Would Zengzi have said such a thing if it were not correct? This is one response to your point.

“Again, there are three things that the world exalts: rank, age, and virtue. At court, nothing is more important than rank, in one’s village it is age that is foremost, but for nurturing an era and sustaining the people, nothing surpasses virtue. How would it be right that the King, because he possesses one of these three, treats with condescension someone who possesses other two?

“So you see, a ruler who will truly accomplish great things will always have subjects he does not summon – if he wishes to consult with them, he will go to them. If a ruler’s respect for virtue and joy in the *dao* does not meet that standard, he is simply not a man to with whom one may plan great things. Tang was a student to Yi Yin first, and only later did he relate to him as ruler to minister; that’s why he was able to become a True King without hard labor. Duke Huan of Qi was a student to Guan Zhong first, and only later did he relate to him as ruler to minister; that’s why he was able to become a hegemon without hard labor. Today, the fact that in the world all the states are of equivalent size with the same poor level of virtue, so that none can prevail over any other, is simply due to rulers taking as ministers men whom they have taught, rather than men from whom they have learned. In the case of Tang and Yi Yin, Duke Huan and Guan Zhong, neither ruler dared to summon those ministers. Now, if Guan Zhong could not be summoned, how much less one who would not stoop to be a man like Guan Zhong?”

**2B.3** Chen Zhen said, “When you were in Qi, the King presented you with a hundred weight in gold and you refused to receive it. In Song you were presented with seventy weight and in Xue fifty, and those you accepted. If your past refusal was proper, then the later acceptances were not; if the acceptances were proper the refusal was not – Sir, you must acknowledge one or the other!”

Mencius said, “I was correct in all these cases. In Song, I was about to depart on a long journey, and travelers must be presented a provisioning gift. The message sent with the gold said it was a gift of provisions – why should I have refused it? In Xue I was forced to take precautions for my safety. The message sent with the gold said that the ruler had heard of this, and was therefore sending funds so I could arm myself – why should I have refused it? But in Qi there was no reason for the gift – to give someone a gift for no reason is to treat them as goods for sale. Whenever has there been a *junzi* for sale?”

## **II. Mencius's conviction that an ideal King lies within every real ruler**

There are many passages in the *Mencius* that recount Mencius's audiences with rulers, and they portray him as bluntly straightforward – quite heroic, given the dangers of the age. Of course, we have to bear in mind that the text's authors were partisan supporters of Mencius, and their account is celebratory, but in light of 2B.1 (above), which seems rather frank in its portrait of Mencius, these narratives may not be too far from the truth.

In 1A.4, a basic facet of Mencius's remonstrances to rulers is illustrated: the Confucian notion that rulers have *responsibilities* to the people.

**1A.4** King Hui of Liang said, "I am most eager to receive instruction from you."

Mencius replied, "Is there a difference between killing a man with a club or a sword?"

The King said, "None."

"Is there a difference between killing him with a sword or with bad government?"

"None"

Mencius said, "There is fat meat in your kitchens and fat horses in your stables, but the people are pale with hunger and corpses lie in the wastelands. This is to lead beasts and devour people. People even detest it when beasts eat beasts. To be the father and mother of the people and yet, in your governance, to fail to leading beasts and devouring people – well, wherein are you the father and mother of the people? Confucius said, 'May he who first fashioned figurines to be interred with the dead be without descendants!' He said this because these forms were made in the image of people and so used. What would he have said for one who led people to starvation and death."

Rulers succeeded to their thrones by heredity, and during the Warring States era, the typical ruler was little more than a warlord – the randomly talented or untalented, more or less rapacious son of the last warlord-ruler. During the Spring and Autumn period, a series state rulers had so distinguished themselves through effective domestic rule and military strength during the early centuries of disunity, following the fall of the Western Zhou in 771 BC that they came to command the allegiance of many of the other lords, and to be regarded as the protectors of the nearly powerless Zhou Kings. These men, few in number, were known as "hegemons," and their example often was what powerful Warring States rulers aspired to emulate, rather than the far more ambitious model that the early Zhou Kings, such as King Wu, presented.

Confucian doctrine portrayed men like King Wu, as well ideal rulers of the legendary past like Yao, Shun, and Yu, as fully legitimate universal rulers – "True Kings" – because they were not only effective and strong, they were moral sages. They seemed almost superhuman to the real rulers of Mencius's day – the hegemons were men like themselves. But Mencius's mission was clearly to find a ruler who could be convinced that he could realize the Confucian ideal of the moral, universal ruler.

The following three passages are selected to illustrate this Mencian commitment, as well as the difficulty he had pursuing it with the actual men he was trying to turn into "sage" rulers.

**1A.7** King Xuan of Qi asked, "Will you teach me about the great hegemons, Duke Huan of Qi and Duke Wen of Jin?"

Mencius replied, "The disciples of Confucius did not speak of the affairs of these rulers, so later generations of followers had nothing to pass on. I have not learned of them. Failing in this, may I speak to you of True Kingship?"

“What sort of virtue must one have to rule as a True King?”

Mencius said, “If one rules by protecting the people, none can stop him.”

“Could a man like me rule as a protector of the people?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know I could?”

Mencius said, “I heard from your courtier Hu He that when Your Majesty was sitting up in the great hall, an ox was dragged by in the court below, and that seeing it you asked, ‘Where are you taking that ox?’ Your courtiers told you that it was to be slaughtered and its blood used to anoint a newly cast bell, and you said, ‘Spare it. I can’t bear to see it whimpering like an innocent man being taken for execution.’ And when your courtiers asked whether you wished them not to consecrate the bell you said, ‘How can we do away with that? Use a sheep instead.’ I wonder whether the story is accurate.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well then, your heart is sufficient for you to reign as a True King. The people all thought you spared the ox because you were stingy, but I understand that it was because you could not bear its distress.”

The King said, “That’s right. That’s just what they said. But even though Qi’s not a big state, how could I begrudge sacrificing a single ox? It was that I couldn’t bear its whimpering like an innocent man being taken for execution, so I told them to substitute a sheep.”

“Your Majesty should not be surprised that the people took you to be stingy, since you substituted a smaller animal for a large one. How could they know? If your concern was that they were being executed despite their innocence, what difference would there be between an ox and a sheep?”

The King laughed. “Really, what was I thinking? I wasn’t thinking about the expense when I said to substitute a sheep, but it’s natural that the people said I was just being stingy.”

Mencius said, “There was no harm in what you did – it was the working of humanity (*ren*). You had seen the ox, but you had not seen the sheep. The way it works with the *junzi* is that if he has seen a bird or beast alive, he cannot watch it die; if he was heard its voice, he cannot bear to eat its flesh. This is why the *junzi* keeps his distance from the kitchen!”

The King was pleased. “The *Poetry* says,

The heart lies within another,  
Yet it is I who takes its measure.

How perfectly this describes you, Sir! When I reflected on my actions, I could not grasp my own mind in this, but your words match perfectly with my feelings at the time. But now tell me how such feelings accord with one who rules as a True King.”

Mencius said, “If someone said to Your Majesty, ‘I have strength enough to lift half a ton, but not to lift a feather; vision clear enough to observe the tip of a hair but not a load of firewood,’ would you accept what he said?”

“No.”

“Well then, why would one accept that Your Majesty’s kindness could extend even to the birds and beasts, but its works could not extend to the people? If one cannot

lift a feather it's because he won't use his use strength; if one can't see a cartload of firewood it's because he won't use his sight. If the people have no protector it's because you are not using your kindness. Hence, Your Majesty does not rule as a True King only because you will not, not because you cannot."

The King said, "How are being unwilling and unable truly different?"

"When it comes to picking up Mt. Tai and carrying it over Bohai Bay, if you tell someone, 'I can't do it,' it's because you truly are not able. When it comes to helping an elderly man crack his joints, if you tell someone, 'I can't do it,' it means you're unwilling to do it, not that you truly are not able. That Your Majesty does not rule as a True King is not a matter of carrying Mt. Tai over Bohai Bay, it is like being unwilling to help an old man crack his joints."

Mencius continued, "Treat your aged kin as the elderly should be treated, and then extend that to the treatment of the aged kinsmen of others; treat your young kin as the young should be treated, and then extend it to the young children of others. If you do this, you will be able to govern the world as though you turned it in your palm. The *Poetry* says:

An exemplar in treating his wife,  
And extending to his brothers,  
Thus he ruled the family and the state.

What this is speaking of is taking one's own heart and applying it in the treatment of others. If you extend your kindness it will be enough to protect all within the Four Seas of the world; if you don't extend your kindness, you can't even protect your wife and children. The reason that the ancients so far exceeded other men is none other than this: they excelled in extending what they did. Now, why is it that you are kind enough in your treatment of birds and beasts, but your works do not extend to the people?

"Only when you when you put a thing on a scale can you know how much it weighs; only after you measure something can you know how long it is. It is so with all things, and the heart more than others. I urge Your Majesty to measure your heart in this way!"

Mencius continued, "But perhaps Your Majesty's heart is only content when you have mobilized your troops, imperiled your subjects, and incited the resentment of other lords. . . ."

"No," said the King. "How could this bring me contentment? It is just that I wish to attain my great desire."

"May I hear what this desire may be?"

The King smiled but did not speak.

Mencius said, "Is it that you lack rich foods that satisfy your palate, fine clothes that bring comfort to your body, colorful décor that can bring pleasure to your eyes, beautiful music to stimulate your ears, or court favorites to carry out your every order? Surely your royal officers could supply such wants – surely these are not what you mean."

"No," said the King. "It is not because of such things."

"In that case, I can guess Your Majesty's great desire. It is to broaden your territories, to have the rulers of Qin and Chu pay homage at your court, to stand at the center of the states and subdue the barbarians beyond the borders in all directions. But to

pursue these ambitions by the means you now employ is like trying to catch fish by climbing a tree.”

The King said, “Is it as bad as that?”

“More likely worse! Climbing a tree in search of fish, though you’ll find no fish, no disaster will follow. Using your methods to seek your ambitions, if you exhaust your heart’s effort in the pursuit, disaster will surely follow.”

“May I hear more?”

Mencius said, “If the small state of Zou fought the great state of Chu, whom does Your Majesty think would prevail?”

“The men of Chu would prevail.”

“Precisely so. And this is because the small is inherently no match for the large, the few are no match for the many, and the weak are no match for the strong. Within all the Four Seas, there are only nine regions of a thousand square li each, and your state of Qi commands altogether only one of these. To subdue eight by means of one – how is this different from little Zou trying to be a match for Chu? Indeed, you must instead reexamine the root of the matter.

“If Your Majesty were now to proclaim policies that were governed by humanity, you would cause all the warriors in the world to wish they could attend Your Majesty at court, all the tillers in the world to wish they could till Your Majesty’s lands, all the merchants in the world to wish they could collect at Your Majesty’s markets, all the travelers in the world to wish they could walk Your Majesty’s roads. Everyone in the world who feels distress because of their rulers would wish to come denounce them before Your Majesty. If this were so, who could stop them?”

The King said, “I am slow witted – I can’t think through your strategy. I ask you, Sir, to assist me in my goals and instruct me in plain terms. Though I am not quick, please make the attempt.”

Mencius said, “Only a gentleman can maintain a constant heart without constant means. For the common people, if they have no constant means of support, they cannot sustain their hearts’ resolve. Without the constant resolve of the heart, they will slip into excesses and deviant behavior, stopping at nothing. Now to allow them to fall into criminal ways in this manner and only then to punish them is to entrap the people. Whenever has there been a man of humanity in authority who set traps for people?

“The enlightened ruler regulates the people’s means of support, ensuring that these are sufficient for them to serve their parents and nurture their wives and children. Through good years, they will always have enough to eat their fill; in bad years, they will at least escape starvation. Then, when he guides them towards goodness, the people will find it no burden to follow.

“But now, regulation of the people’s means of support does not provide them goods sufficient to serve their parents or nurture their wives and children. They live through good years in bitterness and in bad years they cannot escape starvation. In this way, they live in fear that nothing they can do will stave off death – where would they find the time to attend to matters of ritual *li* and right (*yi*)?

“If Your Majesty wishes to put these matters into practice, reexamine the root of the matter. When on every five *mu* plot of land a mulberry tree is planted, those fifty and over are able to wear silk clothes. When chicken, pigs, and dogs are bred in a timely way, all who are seventy and over have meat to eat. If laborers in fields of a hundred *mu* are

not taken from their fieldwork during growing season, then even families with eight mouths to feed will never go hungry. When a ruler attends to the education given in village schools and sees that it is extended by the example of behavior that is filial to parents and deferential to elders, then none with white hair will carry heavy loads along the roads. There has never been a ruler who did not rule as a True King when the aged wore silk and ate meat, and when the people were never hungry or cold.”

The famous “ox passage” portrays a central Mencian strategy – identifying within ordinary people and rulers apparently spontaneous moral responses that can be interpreted as indications of moral potential far beyond anything people normally believe themselves to possess. Mencius, convinced that people are innately moral (as we’ll see later) seem to “see into their hearts” more clearly than they can themselves. Note, though, that he also gives King Xuan prudential reasons for being good – the moral man will receive what the amoral man wishes: the throne of the world.

**1B.1** Zhuang Bao went to see Mencius and said, “I had an audience with the King and he told me he loved music. I didn’t know how to respond. What is the significance of loving music?”

Mencius said, “If the King loves music deeply, then the state of Qi is not far from the mark!”

On another day, when Mencius was in audience with the King he said, “You told Zhuang Bao that you liked music. Is that really so?”

The King blushed. “I’m not capable of appreciating the music of the ancient kings, I just like common music.”

“If Your Majesty loves music deeply, then the state of Qi is not far from the mark! The music of today comes from the music of the past.”

“May I learn more of this?”

Mencius said, “Which gives more pleasure: enjoying music alone or enjoying it in the company of others?”

“In the company of others.”

“In the company of a few or in the company of many?”

“In the company of many.”

Mencius said, “Let me explain enjoyment to Your Majesty. Let’s say you are holding a musical performance, and when the people hear the sound of the bells and drums, pipes and flutes, they all raise their heads quickly with furrowed brows and say to one another, ‘How can our King enjoy music and allow us to come to such dire straits that fathers and sons are parted and do not see one another, and brothers, wives, and children are scattered?’ Or let’s say you go out for the hunt and when the people hear the sound of chariots and horses and see your beautiful banners waving, they all raise their heads quickly with furrowed brows and say to one another, ‘How can our King enjoy hunting and allow us to come to such dire straits that fathers and sons are parted and do not see one another, and brothers, wives, and children are scattered?’ The cause of this would be none other than that one has failed to share one’s pleasures with the people.

“Now, let’s say you are holding a musical performance, and when the people hear the sound of the bells and drums, pipes and flutes, they all raise their heads happily and smiling say to one another, ‘Our King must surely be in good health. How he takes pleasure in music!’ Or let’s say you go out for the hunt and when the people hear the sound of chariots and horses and see your beautiful banners waving, they all raise their heads happily and smiling say to one another, ‘Our King must surely be in good health.

How he takes pleasure in music!’ The cause of this would be none other than that one has shared one’s pleasures with the people.

“If Your Majesty would share with the people the pleasures you take, your would rule as a True King.”

**1B.5** King Xuan of Qi asked, “I have been advised to tear down the Bright Hall. Should I do so or not?”

Mencius replied, “The Bright Hall is the seat of kingly governance. If Your Majesty wishes to practice the governance of a True King, you should not tear it down.”

“May I learn more of the governance of a True King?”

Mencius replied, “In past times, when King Wen ruled at the city of Qí, he took only one part in nine as a tax on those who tilled the land, and those who serve his government inherited their stipends. At the border, goods in trade were inspected but no fees were levied, no restrictions were placed on the use of fish traps installed by dams and weirs, and penalties for those convicted of crimes never entailed their wives and children. Widows and widowers, orphans and the aged without children to support them, these classes of people without means or others to turn to, were always given priority in the proclamations through King Wen announced his human (*ren*) policies. The *Poetry* says:

Well off are the wealthy,  
Sorrow for the forsaken.

The King said, “Well said!”

“If Your Majesty thinks well of the words, why do you not follow them?”

“I have a weakness. I have a love of wealth.”

Mencius said, “In past times, the old Zhou leader Gong Liu loved wealth as well. The *Poetry* tells of it:

Stocking and storing,  
Sealing up grain  
In sacks and in bags,  
Till harmony shone bright.  
Bows and arrows laid out,  
Spears, halberd, and axes,  
At last marching forth.

Not until those who remained at home could rely on full stores of grain and those went to war carried with them sacks full of provisions that he marched on campaign. If Your Majesty’s love of wealth were only shared with the people, what hindrance could there be to ruling as a True King?”

The King said, “But I have another weakness. I have a love of women.”

Mencius said, “In past times King Tai had a love of women – how he cherished his consort! The *Poetry* tells of it:

Danfu, the Old Duke,  
Galloped west at dawn,  
Along the western waters  
To the land below Mt. Qí,

Lady Jiang by his side,  
In search of a new home.

And in those days, no young woman could complain she lacked a man and no young man lacked a wife. If Your Majesty's love of women were only shared with the people, what hindrance could there be to ruling as a True King?"

### **III. Mencius's political 'populism'**

One of the best known and most celebrated aspects on Mencius's thought is his advocacy of the interests of the common people as prior to the interests of rulers, whose legitimacy depends not solely on hereditary succession, but on fulfillment of their service mission to their populations.

**7B.14** Mencius said, "The people are most important; the state altars to the spirits of earth and grain come next and the ruler last of all. For this reason, any man who gains the support of the great mass of people reigns as the Son of Heaven. Those who gain the confidence of the Son of Heaven become the lords of states, and those who gain their confidence become grandees. When the lord of a state endangers its altars, he should be replaced. When fat animals have been offered in sacrifice, the grain offerings have been pure, the ceremonies performed on schedule, yet drought or floods ensue, then the altars should be replaced."

In 7B.14, the altars refer to the shrines each state and major locality within the state maintained to agricultural deities broadly worshiped in Warring States (and later) society.

**1B.2** King Xuan of Qi asked, "It is said that King Wen's royal park was seventy li square. Is that so?"

Mencius replied, "It is reported so in the histories."

"As big as that!"

"Yet the people felt it was small."

"My park is only forty li square – why then do the people say it is large?"

Mencius said, "King Wen's park of seventy *li* was open to woodcutters and to those who entered to catch pheasants and rabbits. He shared it with the people. Is it any wonder that they considered it small?"

"When I first came to the borders of your state, I inquired about its prohibitions before daring to enter. I was informed that there was a park forty li square on the outskirts of the capital, where the killing of a deer was treated as an offence comparable to killing a man. This park, then, is merely a forty square li trap in the midst of the state. Is it any wonder that the people consider it large?"

1B.2 resonates closely with 1B.1, which we read above in connection with the issue of the pleasures that ordinary rulers experience that give promise of ideal ethical traits. In 1B.2, Mencius argues his populist position on a purely prudential basis – be moral and fulfill your obligations to the people, and people will stop hassling you about your excessive luxuries.

The following passage is selected from Book 5A, which is devoted to conversations between Mencius and his disciple Wan Zhang concerning how history (more often legendary history) should be interpreted, consistent with Mencius's doctrines.

**5A.5** Wan Zhang said, “Is it true that Yao gave the world to Shun?”

Mencius said, “No. The Son of Tian cannot bestow the world upon anyone.”

“But then, if Shun possessed the world, who gave it to him?”

“Tian bestowed it upon him.”

“Was Tian’s presentation an order clearly stated?”

“No,” said Mencius. “Tian does not speak. It simply revealed it through action and event.”

“How did it do this?”

Mencius said, “The Son of Tian may recommend a successor to Tian, but cannot make Tian bestow the world upon him. The lords of the states may recommend successors to the Son of Tian, but they cannot make him bestow their states upon them. Grandees may recommend successors to the lords of the states, but they cannot make their lords bestow their ranks upon them. Yao recommended Shun to Tian and Tian accepted him; he presented him to the people and the people accepted him. That is why we say Tian does not speak. It simply revealed it through action and event.”

“May I ask about the process whereby Shun was recommended to Tian and Tian accepted him, and by which Shun was presented to the people and the people accepted him?”

Mencius said, “He was tasked with conducting the sacrifices and all the spirits accepted the sacrifices; this constituted the acceptance of Tian. He was tasked with the management of affairs, and affairs were well ordered and the population content with them; this constituted the acceptance of the people. Tian gave the world to Shun and the people gave the world to Shun. This is why I say that the Son of Tian cannot bestow the world upon anyone.

“Shun was able to be chief minister to Yao for twenty-eight years, and that is not something that could be accomplished through human agency alone – it was Tian’s doing. When Yao died and the three-year period of mourning came to an end, Shun went off south of Nanhe in order to leave the way open to Yao’s son. But the lords of the states did not attend the court of Yao’s son, and came instead to Shun; persons with disputes did not seek judgment from Yao’s son, but came instead to Shun; balladeers did not sing praises to Yao’s son, but sang instead of Shun. This is why I say it was the doing of Tian. Only afterwards did Shun return to the central states and mount the Son of Tian’s throne. Had he simply occupied Yao’s mansion and forced out Yao’s son, it would have been usurpation, not the gift of Tian. This is what the ‘Oath of Tai’ means when it says:

Tian sees through my people’s sight;  
Tian hears through my people’s ears.

On the surface, 5A.5 seems to grant to Tian the power to legitimize rulers, and to bear some hint of a “divine right” notion that whatever the King does is justified because of his heavenly election. But by declaring that Tian bestows its Mandate through “action and event,” the effect of these ideas becomes profoundly different. What actually legitimizes rulers is that the spirits accept his sacrifices and the people accept his administration. Since spirits were never known to turn down a meal, that effectively gives the people final say, as the closing quote forcefully implies.

For more on Mencius’s ideas about Tian’s role, see 5A.6 in the Selections; that passage goes into more detail about legitimacy and also explains how Tian could bypass a sage like Confucius.

The most famously populist passage in the *Mencius* concerns his evaluation of the ultimate anti-monarchist episode in the history known to him: the execution of the last ruler of the Shang Dynasty by the founding king of the Zhou, an example of a subject assassinating his ruler and usurping his throne. Mencius, however, never blinks when confronted with this example, deeming that the Shang king (whose personal name was Zhòu) had forfeited his legitimacy through his evil actions before the Zhou founders moved to claim the Mandate that had already been shifted to them.

**1B.8** King Xuan of Qi asked, “Is it so that the Shang Dynasty founder Tang banished Jie, the last king of the Xia, and that King Wu of the Zhou killed Zhòu, the last king of the Shang?”

Mencius replied, “It is so recorded in the histories.”

“Is it permissible, then, for a subject to kill his ruling lord?”

Mencius said, “A man who plunders humanity is called a thief; a man who plunders right (*yi*) is called an outcast. I have heard of the execution of Outcast Zhòu; I have not heard of the execution of a ruling lord Zhòu.”

The abrasiveness of Mencius’s populist message and the limitations he placed on rulers’ claims to legitimacy is apparent in the following passage.

**1B.6** Mencius addressed King Xuan of Qi. “Suppose a subject of Your Majesty entrusted his wife and children to a friend and traveled south to Chu, and when he returned, his friend had left his wife and child to suffer in cold and hunger. What should this man do?”

The King said, “Discard him as a friend.”

“And what if the Master of the Guard cannot keep order among his men, what then?”

“Dismiss him.”

“And what if there is disorder within the borders of the state, what then?”

The King turned to his other courtiers and changed the subject.

#### **IV. The efficacy of moral leadership**

As noted earlier, part of Mencius’s task was to convince the rough warlord rulers of his time that they were potentially as moral as sages like Yao and Shun. The complementary task was to convince them that they wanted to be. His arguments that moral rule will lead to True Kingship, with its necessarily universal hold over the world, are the core of his prudential advice to rulers.

**1A.5** King Hui of Liang said, “As you know well, Sir, there was no state so powerful as the old state of Jin [predecessor of Wei (Liang)]. But now, during my reign, we were defeated by Qi in the east – my son and heir was killed in that war – and in the west, Qin has taken from us seven hundred square li of territory, while Chu has humbled us in the south. I am ashamed of this, and I wish to wash away this disgrace on behalf of those who have died. What should I do?”

Mencius replied, “One may reign as a True King from a territory as small as one hundred li square. If Your Majesty would only govern the people by means of policies according with humanity, being sparing in punishments, keeping taxes light, encouraging

the people to plough deep and weed readily, then the young would have leisure to cultivate the virtues of filiality, deference towards elders, loyalty, faithfulness. At home, they would serve their parents and elder brothers, abroad they would serve their elders and superiors – such people could beat back the armor and swords of Qin and Chu armed with nothing but pikes.

“Other rulers commandeer the labor of the summer fieldwork so that people have no way to do their ploughing and weeding. Their parents freeze and starve, while brothers, wives, and children are forced to scatter. These rulers entrap their people till they sink and drown. If Your Majesty were to campaign against such rulers, what enemies could be your match? Thus it is said that the man of humanity has no enemies – may Your Majesty never doubt it!”

**1B.3** King Xuan of Qi asked, “Do you have a formula for diplomacy with neighboring states?”

“Mencius replied, “I do. Only a man of humanity is able properly to put his large state at the service of a smaller one. In this way the Shang Dynasty founder Tang was able to serve the Ge people and King Wen of the Zhou was able to serve the Kunyi people. Only the wise man is able properly to put his small state in the service of a larger one. In this way the Zhou ancestral leader King Tai was able to serve the Xunyu people and Goujian, King of Yue, was able to serve Wu. Those who put the large in the service of the small are those who take joy in Tian; those who put the small in the service of the large are those who act in awe of Tian. Those who take joy in Tian are the protectors of the world; those who act in awe of Tian are the protectors of their states. The *Poetry* says:

Act in awe of the majesty of Tian  
And in this way protect it.”

The King said, “Your words are great! Yet I have a weakness. I have a love of valor.”

Mencius replied, “I beg that Your Majesty not be fond of petty valor. To stroke one’s sword hilt and glare, saying, ‘How dare that man oppose me!’ is the valor of the vulgar man, enough only to match a single enemy. Your Majesty, you need to go beyond this.

“The *Poetry* says:

The King blazed in anger  
And set his troops in ranks  
To stop the enemy’s march on Ju,  
Deepen the blessings of the Zhou,  
And answer the wish of the world.

And the *Documents* says: ‘Tian sent down the people of the world, and made for them a ruler and thereby a teacher, that he might assist the Lord on High in cherishing them. “In all the Four Quarters of the world, for the guilty and the innocent, the burden falls on me alone!” Who in the world dared cross his will?’

“When one man in the world bullied others, King Wu of the Zhou felt ashamed of it. This was the valor of King Wu – and indeed, in a single outburst of rage, he brought peace to the world. Now if you too would bring peace to the world in a single outburst of rage, the people will fear only that you are not fond of valor.”

In addition to prevailing over the world, a moral ruler will also have a transformative effect upon his own people, thus making them ethical and easy to rule.

**4B.5** Mencius said, “When the ruler is humane (*ren*), none will fail to be humane. When a ruler is righteous (*yi*), none will fail to be righteous.

## **V. Mencius’s political conservatism**

The Warring States era was a period in which the old aristocratic social order, based on hereditary succession to office, gave way to forces which would lead to a new Imperial era of meritocracy (appointment to official position generally based on qualifications). Confucians tended to be supporters of meritocratic appointment – the legends of Yao and Shun were important Confucian tools in this regard. But the *Mencius* limits its support of meritocracy, both by its clear view that aristocratic society was culturally superior, and by its suspicion that meritocratic appointment often simply rewarded political charlatans who used clever and immoral arguments to gain the confidence of rulers. As we will see later, Mencius’s own political career came tumbling down almost as soon as it had begun because of an incident in the state of Yan involving just such a case. Consequently, the *Mencius*’s position on political advancement is, despite its generally populist stance, rather conservative.

**7A.36** Mencius traveled from Fan to Qi. Gazing at the heir apparent in Qi he sighed. “How crucial is one’s home environment! The environment of one’s home alter one’s *qi*, and the nurturance one receives there alters one’s body. Aren’t we all the children of people? This prince has a home, horse and chariot, and clothes, much like other people – yet look at him! It is his home environment that makes the difference. How much more the difference would be if he lived in the broadest dwelling in the world!

“The lord of Lu traveled to Song and called out at the Dieze city gate. The gateman said, ‘This is not my lord; why does his tone sound so much like my lord’s?’ There was no other reason: their home environments were similar.”

**1B.7** Mencius appeared in audience before King Xuan of Qi and said, “We don’t call a state ‘traditional’ because its trees are tall and old; it is because its court ministers come from families that serve from generation to generation. Your Majesty has no intimate court ministers because those you appointed in the past have already disappeared who knows where.”

The King said, “How could I have known they lacked talent when I appointed them?”

Mencius said, “A ruler promotes men on the basis of worth only when absolutely necessary. One must be so cautious when promoting the lowly over the exalted and the unfamiliar over the familiar! Even if all your close advisors say he is worthy, that’s not enough. Even if all the grandees of state say he’s worthy, that’s not enough. If all the people of the state say he’s worthy, investigate, and if you find that he is indeed worthy,

only then appoint him. On the other hand, even if all your close advisors say a minister in office is unworthy, that's not enough to dismiss him. Even if all the grandees of state say he is unworthy, that's not enough either. But if all the people of the state say he is unworthy, investigate, and if you find that he is indeed unworthy, only then dismiss him.

“Likewise, if all your close advisors say a man should be executed, that's not enough to kill him. Even if all the grandees of state say he should be executed, that's not enough either. But if all the people of the state say he should be executed, investigate, and if you find that he is indeed worthy of execution, only then kill him. This is why records of the past sometimes say, ‘The people of the state killed him.’

“Only in this way can you become father and mother to the people.”

**4A.6** Mencius said, “There is no difficulty in governing – do not offend the great clan houses. What the great houses admire all in the state will admire. What all in a state admire, the world will admire. In this way, the influence of one's virtue will flow like a flood, streaming to the four seas.”

The “great houses” refers to the aristocratic hereditary elite. The passage gives preference to their view over the view of the ruler that might be helped by his “political” appointees – men he had appointed on the basis of merit, which, in 1B.7, just above, Mencius clearly views with suspicion.

**6B.10** Bo Gui, Prime Minister of Wei, said, “I would like to reduce the rate of taxation to one part in twenty. How would that be?”

Mencius said, “The *dao* that you would follow by doing this would be that of the barbarian Mo people. In a state of ten thousand households, how would it be if there were only one potter?”

“That would not work. There would be too few utensils.”

“In the land of the Mo, the five grains do not grow, all that grows is millet. They have no walled towns or household compounds, no ancestral temples or rituals of sacrifice, no diplomatic encounters with exchanges of gifts and banquets, and they lack the many offices of state and ceremony. This is why they are able to tax at a rate of one part in twenty. Now if the central states were in this way to discard the relationships among people and the offices of ruler and subject, would that be acceptable? It is impossible to maintain a state if even potters are insufficient in number – how much more so with gentlemen in authority?

“Those who wish to tax at rates lighter than set by the *dao* of Yao and Shun are simply greater or lesser barbarians like the Mo. Those who wish to tax at rates heavier than set by the *dao* of Yao and Shun are simply greater or lesser tyrants like Jie.”

Mencius was a great advocate of light taxation. Taxes in Warring States times could effectively seize a very large portion of crops and other forms of ordinary people's wealth, and Mencius at several points advocates reductions to about ten percent, which his history tells him was traditional (see 3A.3 below). Here, however, Mencius makes clear that his goal is not “small government,” but optimal and efficient government, adequate to provide moral and cultural leadership.

## VI. The specifics of Mencius's political traditionalism

The *Mencius* occasionally becomes quite detailed about the policies it advocates for states, drawing on a vision of the utopian past that modern interpreters often see as imagined by Confucians, but projected into history to allow them to claim that their radical programs were simply “traditional.”

In themselves the details are not of great interest – the following illustrative passage is optional reading.

### 3A.3 Duke Wen of Teng asked about governance.

Mencius said, “A ruler must not be slow in handling the business of the people.

The *Poetry* says:

By day they gather up the reeds,  
By night they weave them into ropes,  
Rush up to repair the roof,  
Then off to sow the seeds of grain.

The *dao* that pertains to the common people is that those who have a constant sufficiency of goods will have a constancy of mind, while those who lack a constancy of goods lack a constancy of mind. Without any constancy of mind, they will abandon themselves to strange behavior and excesses, there will be nothing they are unwilling to do. If you punish people only after they fall into crime in this way, then you have set a trap for your people. When has there ever been a man of *ren* on the throne who entrapped people in this way? This a worthy ruler will be reverent and thrifty, and will treat his subordinates with *li*. He will only take from his people what is prescribed in the codes of the state. Yang Hu said, ‘One who pursues wealth will not be *ren*; one who pursues *ren* will not be wealthy.’

“During the Xia Dynasty era, families were each allotted fifty *mu* of land, and they were taxed by the *gong* system; during the Shang, families had seventy *mu* of land, and the tax system was called the *zhu*; Zhou Dynasty families had one hundred *mu* each, and were taxed according to the *che* system. Basically, all three systems were designed to tax at a rate of about one-tenth. The term *che* means ‘what is taken’; the term *zhu* means ‘what is lent.’ Longzi said, ‘In managing the land, no system was better than the *zhu* or worse than the *gong*.’ The *gong* system calculated a normal tax amount on the basis of an average over several years. In good years, when grain was so plentiful that people wasted it, the government could have taken more and the people would not have considered it harsh, but it took relatively little. In bad years, when food was so scarce that the people ate the husks which should have fertilized the fields, the government still insisted on its full quota. If the ruler, as father and mother of the people, exhausts the people so that they can’t care for aged parents no matter how hard they work, even as they pile on debt, until young and old alike tumble into the gutters to die, in what way is he the father and mother of the people? Teng has always practiced hereditary possession of income producing lands for its noble families. The *Poetry* says:

Rain on the lord’s shared fields,  
And then reach to our private ones.

Only the *zhu* system involved designated common and private fields in this way. Looked at in this way, though, the Zhou effectively used the *zhu* too.

“You should establish schools to teach the people, calling them *xiang*, *xu*, *xue*, or *xiao*. *Xiang* means ‘nurture’; *xiao* means ‘teach’; *xu* were named for archery training. The Xia called schools *xiao*; the Shang called them *xu*; the Zhou called them *xiang*. All three eras used the term ‘study’ (*xue*). In all cases, the goal was to clarify the relationships of human society. When human relationships are clearly understood by those above, people are kind to those below them down to the lowest levels. Should a True King arise, he will surely take this principle as his model and you will become the teacher of a True King.

“The *Poetry* says:

Though the Zhou was an old state  
Its mandate is new.

Here it refers to King Wen. If you try with all your might, you can surely make your state new.”

The Duke sent his minister Bi Zhan to ask about the “well-field system.”

“Well-field system”: It was believed that in the utopian past, land was divided into parcels of nine squares, in the pattern of the Chinese character for the word “well”: 井. The eight outer fields were assigned as private plots to eight families. The central field was “common” (or the “duke’s field”). The eight families worked it as their tax contribution to the ruler, as Mencius specifies below. The ruler often assigned its proceeds as a hereditary stipend to a specific noble family, or as a temporary stipend to a minister assigned to a specific functional role. The *Poetry* couplet above, speaking of shared and private fields, refers to this system. It is not known whether such a system was ever actually practiced.

Mencius said, “Your ruler plans to implement humane governance and has selected you for this purpose. You must exert yourself! Humane governance always starts from the setting of land boundaries. If boundaries are not properly drawn, the division of land into nine-parcel “wells” will be uneven, and stipends of public field grain will be unequal. This is why despotic rulers and corrupt officers invariably disrupt field boundaries. Once the boundaries are settled, the divisions of fields and setting of stipends will be effortless.

“Now, Teng is a very small state, but it certainly must have both those who rule from court and those who live out on the land. Without rulers at court there would be no way to bring order to those on the land, and without those on the land there would be no way to sustain those who rule at court.

“I recommend that those living on the land be taxed at a rate of one ninth, in the manner of the *zhu*, while those who live within the walls of the capital should be taxed at a rate of one-tenth, and required to deliver their tax directly. From the highest ministers down, court officers should be provided fifty *mu* of land whose income will supply the costs of their ancestral sacrifices. For every additional adult male in the family line, another twenty-five *mu* of land should be assigned.

“In the burial of the dead or in moving one’s home, people should not be permitted to go beyond their home village. If those who together till a well field’s land befriend one another at home and abroad, help look out for one another, and support one another in illness, the people will live in close comradeship.

“A well field measures one li square or nine hundred *mu*. The central plot is shared as ‘common’ land; the eight families each cultivate one of the outer hundred *mu* plots privately, and farm the common plot together. Only when the work on the common plot is done do they dare turn to their private duties. This is the distinctive character of the people who live on the land.

“All this is a broad overview. As for filling in the outlines, that must be up to your ruler and you.”