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Mencius

The Wise Philosopher — The Moral Vision for a Better World

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Free Sample · Chapter One

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CHAPTER ONE

An Age of Iron — The Warring States World

The Broken Mirror of Zhou

Every age imagines a golden past against which it measures its own failures. For Mencius and his contemporaries, that past had a name: Zhou. Around 1046 BCE, according to the traditional reckoning (the precise date is still debated), the Zhou people of the western Wei River valley overthrew the last king of the Shang dynasty and established a new order across the north China plain. Later Confucian memory turned the founders of Zhou into paragons of virtue. King Wen, "the Cultured King," had nurtured his people and attracted the loyalty of the worthy. His son King Wu, "the Martial King," had led the campaign against the Shang tyrant Zhou Xin (a name easily confused in English with the dynasty, though the characters are different). And the Duke of Zhou, King Wu's brother, had served as regent for the young King Cheng, crushed rebellion, and according to tradition established the rituals and institutions that would govern Zhou society for centuries.

The Zhou kings ruled their vast territory through a network of kin and allies. Royal relatives and loyal clans were granted lands and the right to rule them as hereditary lords. In return they owed the king military service, tribute, and ritual deference. Historians sometimes call this arrangement "feudal," though the term carries European baggage and many scholars now avoid it. Whatever we call it, the system rested on bonds of lineage and ritual. The ruling houses of the various states shared ancestors, intermarried, and performed sacrifices whose order of precedence mirrored the political hierarchy. Bronze vessels inscribed with records of royal favor were cast and used in ancestral temples, linking the living to the dead and the local lord to the Son of Heaven.

This order did not last. In 771 BCE, the Zhou capital in the west was sacked by an alliance of rebellious nobles and non-Zhou peoples, and King You was killed. The court fled east to Luoyang, beginning the period historians call the Eastern Zhou. From that point on, the Zhou kings retained their ritual prestige but steadily lost real power. The great regional lords, nominally their vassals, became independent rulers in all but name.

The first phase of the Eastern Zhou is known as the Spring and Autumn period (770–481 BCE), after the court chronicle of the state of Lu, the Chunqiu or "Spring and Autumn Annals," which later tradition attributed to the editorial hand of Confucius. During these centuries there were well over a hundred political units at the outset, many tiny. Warfare among them was frequent but, by later standards, limited. Armies were built around chariots driven by aristocratic warriors, and battles were often governed by codes of honor. The most famous illustration, recorded in the Zuo Commentary (Zuozhuan), concerns Duke Xiang of Song, who in 638 BCE refused to attack the army of Chu while it was crossing a river, and refused again while it was forming its ranks, because to strike an unprepared enemy was beneath a gentleman. He lost the battle and was mortally wounded. Even in antiquity, opinion was divided over whether he was admirably honorable or merely foolish. The anecdote nonetheless captures a world in which war was still, in part, a ritual performance among kinsmen.

As central authority weakened, the strongest lords took on the role of "hegemon" (ba), presiding over alliances of states, organizing defense against outsiders, and enforcing a rough order in the name of the Zhou king. Duke Huan of Qi, advised by his brilliant minister Guan Zhong, was remembered as the first great hegemon in the seventh century BCE; Duke Wen of Jin followed. Confucius admired Guan Zhong's achievement in preserving civilization against invaders, even while criticizing his personal extravagance (Analects 14.16–17, 3.22). Mencius, as we shall see, was far less generous. To him the hegemons

represented a corruption of true kingship: they used the language of righteousness as a cloak for power (Mengzi 2A3, 6B7).

Confucius himself (traditionally 551–479 BCE) lived at the end of the Spring and Autumn period, in the small state of Lu. He saw his own state dominated by three powerful ministerial families who had usurped the prerogatives of the duke, and he lamented that ritual and music were being performed by people who had no right to them. His response was to call for a restoration of the moral order of early Zhou, not through force but through the cultivation of virtuous people, the junzi or "gentlemen," whose example would transform society. He gathered disciples, sought office with limited success, traveled among the states in search of a ruler who would employ him, and died believing he had failed. The movement he founded, however, survived him. By the time Mencius was born, the followers of Confucius, known as the Ru or "classicists," were one of the major intellectual currents of the age.

The Coming of the Warring States

The second phase of the Eastern Zhou bears a grimmer name: the Warring States period (Zhanguo), conventionally dated from the fifth century BCE to the Qin unification in 221 BCE. Historians differ over the starting point. Some use 481 BCE, where the Spring and Autumn Annals ends; some use 475 BCE, following Sima Qian's chronological tables; others prefer 453 BCE, when the great state of Jin was effectively carved up by three of its ministerial families, or 403 BCE, when the Zhou king formally recognized those families as independent rulers of the new states of Han, Zhao, and Wei. The name itself comes from the Zhanguo ce, "Stratagems of the Warring States," a collection of speeches and anecdotes compiled in its received form by Liu Xiang in the first century BCE.

Whatever date we choose, the transformation is unmistakable. The partition of Jin was a revolution: the ministerial families who had served a hereditary lord had overthrown him and divided his realm. A

similar usurpation happened in Qi, where the Tian family, originally refugees from the small state of Chen, gradually accumulated power and finally displaced the ancient ruling house of Jiang, descendants of the Zhou founding minister Taigong Wang. The Zhou king recognized the Tian as rulers of Qi in 386 BCE. Thus several of the great states that Mencius would visit were ruled by dynasties only a few generations old, whose claim to legitimacy rested not on ancient investiture but on successful seizure of power. This helps to explain why questions of legitimacy, of what makes a ruler rightful, were so pressing in his time, and why rulers were so eager, and so nervous, to hear Mencius talk about the sage-kings of antiquity who had won the world through virtue.

By the middle of the fourth century BCE, the political map had consolidated around seven major powers, traditionally called the "Seven Heroes" of the Warring States: Qin in the far west, guarding the passes into the Wei valley; Chu in the vast, semi-tropical south along the Yangzi; Qi on the eastern coast, rich from salt, fish, and commerce; Yan in the cold northeast, near modern Beijing; and the three successor states of Jin in the center, namely Han, Zhao, and Wei. Wei, whose capital moved during the fourth century to Daliang (near modern Kaifeng), was also called Liang, which is why its ruler appears in the Mengzi as King Hui of Liang. Around these giants clustered a dwindling number of smaller states, including Lu, the homeland of Confucius; Song, descended from the Shang royal house; Teng, a tiny principality where Mencius would briefly find a receptive ruler; and Zou, Mencius's own birthplace. The Zhou king himself survived as a powerless figurehead, his domain reduced to a handful of towns around Luoyang, until Qin extinguished the line in 256 BCE.

A sign of the times was the adoption of the title wang, "king." In the Spring and Autumn period, only the Zhou ruler and the semi-barbarian rulers of Chu had claimed this title; other lords were dukes, marquises, and earls. In the fourth century, one after another of the great lords declared himself king. The rulers of Wei and Qi

recognized each other as kings at a meeting at Xuzhou in 334 BCE, and others followed. This was more than vanity. A king was, in theory, the Son of Heaven, the one legitimate ruler of "all under Heaven" (tianxia). By claiming the title, the Warring States rulers announced their ambition to unify the world under their own rule. When Mencius addressed these men as kings and spoke to them about how a "true king" (wang zhe) might unify the realm, he was speaking directly to their deepest ambitions. He was also, subtly, redefining those ambitions. A true king, he would insist, wins the world not by conquest but by winning the hearts of its people.

The Machinery of Total War

The most important fact about the Warring States period is that war became total. The changes were technological, social, and administrative, and they reinforced one another.

Iron came into widespread use during these centuries, first for agricultural tools and then increasingly for weapons. Iron plows and hoes allowed the cultivation of heavier soils and the clearing of new land, which supported larger populations. Large-scale irrigation and water-control projects, such as the canal systems of Wei and later the Zhengguo canal and Dujiangyan works of Qin, multiplied the harvest. More grain meant more people, and more people meant more soldiers.

At the same time, the chariot-borne aristocrat gave way to the mass infantry army. The crossbow, a weapon that required little training but could pierce armor at long range, spread during the fourth century and made massed ranks of commoners deadly. Cavalry, borrowed from the nomadic peoples of the northern steppe, was adopted most famously by King Wuling of Zhao around 307 BCE, who ordered his troops to wear the trousers and short tunics of the horsemen rather than the flowing robes of Chinese tradition, scandalizing conservatives. Walls grew longer and thicker; siege warfare became a specialized science, and the followers of Mozi, as

we shall see in Chapter Eight, earned a reputation as experts in defensive engineering.

The scale of the armies grew accordingly. Our sources, which may exaggerate, speak of states that could field hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Even allowing for exaggeration, the change from the small chariot forces of the Spring and Autumn period was staggering. Campaigns could last months or years. Casualties, according to the figures recorded by Sima Qian, reached horrifying levels. The most notorious case, the battle of Changping in 260 BCE, in which Qin is said to have buried alive some four hundred thousand surrendered soldiers of Zhao, came several decades after Mencius's death, and modern historians treat the figure with caution. But the trend it represents was well under way in his lifetime. Mencius's sharpest words on war capture the reality: "In wars to gain land, they kill until the fields are full of corpses. In wars to gain cities, they kill until the cities are full of corpses. This is what is called leading the land to devour human flesh. Death is not punishment enough for such a crime" (Mengzi 4A14).

To feed, arm, and command such armies required a new kind of state. Over the course of the fifth and fourth centuries, the leading powers transformed themselves from loose aristocratic polities into centralized bureaucratic monarchies. Hereditary nobles were replaced or supplemented by appointed officials, paid in grain and removable at the ruler's will. Territory was divided into counties (xian) and commanderies (jun) administered by these officials. Populations were registered household by household so that they could be taxed and conscripted. Law codes were written down and publicly promulgated. The reforms associated with Li Kui in Wei in the early fourth century, with Wu Qi in Chu, and above all with Shang Yang in Qin from the 350s BCE onward, aimed to turn the entire population into an instrument of agriculture and war.

Shang Yang's program, as described in Sima Qian's biography and in the text that bears his name, the Book of Lord Shang (Shangjunshu),

is chillingly systematic. Households were organized into groups of five and ten whose members were held mutually responsible for one another's crimes; failure to denounce a wrongdoer was punished as severely as the wrongdoing itself. Rank and reward were tied strictly to military merit, measured in enemy heads taken, and to agricultural production. Commerce and scholarship were discouraged as distractions from the "two fundamental occupations" of farming and fighting. The Book of Lord Shang, compiled over some time by Shang Yang's followers, openly treats the people as raw material to be shaped by rewards and punishments, and regards traditional virtues such as benevolence, filial piety, and the study of the Odes and Documents as parasites on the state. It is hard to imagine a vision more opposed to that of Mencius. Shang Yang was executed in 338 BCE after his patron died, torn apart by chariots, but his reforms endured, and they made Qin the most formidable military power of the age.

The Human Cost

Behind the grand narrative of state-building lie countless individual tragedies, and Mencius is one of our most eloquent witnesses to them. He speaks repeatedly of the old and weak dying in the ditches, of young men scattered to the four quarters, of parents who cannot see their children, of brothers, wives, and children separated (Mengzi 1A5, 1B12, 2B4). He describes rulers whose kitchens are full of fat meat and whose stables are full of fat horses, while the people look hungry and the fields are strewn with those who have starved (Mengzi 1A4). He tells King Hui of Liang that when dogs and pigs eat food meant for humans and the ruler does not think to restrain it, when people die of starvation on the roads and he does not think to open the granaries, and then he says, "It is not my doing; it is the year," that is no different from stabbing a man to death and saying, "It was not I; it was the weapon" (Mengzi 1A3).

These are not abstract complaints. In a world where a state might conscript a significant share of its adult males for a single campaign, every war meant fields left untended, harvests lost, and families shattered. Taxation grew heavier as the costs of war mounted. Corvée labor, the obligation to work on public projects such as walls and canals, took farmers away from their land at critical seasons. Mencius's insistence that rulers must "not interfere with the farming seasons" (Mengzi 1A3) reflects an acute awareness of how state demands could tip peasant families into famine.

Mencius also saw how the logic of the age corrupted those who served it. "Those whom the present day calls good ministers," he said, "the ancients would have called robbers of the people" (Mengzi 6B9). A minister who expanded his lord's territory, filled his treasury, and won his battles was praised by his contemporaries; but if the lord did not aspire to the Way, such a minister was merely enriching a tyrant, like someone who helps a Jie, the archetypal bad last king of Xia, to grow richer. "Following the way of the present day, without changing its customs," Mencius warned, "even if one were given the whole world, one could not hold it for a single morning."

The Hundred Schools

If the Warring States period was an age of iron, it was also an age of ideas. The very instability that brought suffering also created opportunity. Rulers desperate for any advantage were willing to listen to anyone who claimed to know how to make a state rich and strong. A new social type emerged: the shi, a term that had once meant the lowest rank of the aristocracy, men trained in arms or letters who served greater lords, but which came increasingly to mean educated men of talent available for employment, whatever their birth. Some shi were military strategists, some diplomats, some administrators, some teachers of morality and statecraft. They traveled from court to court, offering their services, and the most successful could rise to the highest offices.

Later Chinese historians spoke of the "Hundred Schools" (baijia) of thought that flourished in this era. The number is figurative, and the neat classification of thinkers into schools, such as the Confucians (Ru), Mohists (Mo), Daoists (Dao), Legalists (Fa), Logicians or School of Names (Ming), Yin-Yang theorists, and others, was largely the work of Han dynasty bibliographers looking back on a messier reality. Nonetheless the diversity was real. In Mencius's lifetime one could encounter, among others:

The followers of Mozi (c. 470–391 BCE), organized into a disciplined movement under a leader, who preached "impartial caring" (jian ai), condemned offensive warfare, denounced the extravagance of Confucian funerals and music, and argued that every doctrine should be judged by whether it benefits the people.

The followers of Yang Zhu, whose teachings survive only in fragments and hostile reports, who were said to value one's own life and bodily integrity above all external goods, so much so that, in Mencius's polemical phrase, Yang Zhu "would not pluck out a single hair to benefit the whole world" (Mengzi 7A26).

The agriculturalists, such as Xu Xing, who claimed to follow the way of the legendary farmer-sage Shennong and taught that rulers should till the fields alongside their people (Mengzi 3A4).

Statecraft theorists such as Shen Buhai (d. 337 BCE), chancellor of Han, who developed techniques for a ruler to control his ministers, and the heirs of Shang Yang in Qin.

Diplomatic strategists such as Su Qin and Zhang Yi, the masters of "vertical and horizontal alliances" (hezong lianheng), who shuttled between courts building and breaking coalitions. When someone praised Zhang Yi and his colleague Gongsun Yan as "truly great men" because their anger could make the feudal lords tremble, Mencius retorted that they were merely following their rulers' wishes like obedient wives, and offered instead his own definition of the great man, which we will examine in later chapters (Mengzi 3B2).

Thinkers associated with what would later be called Daoism. Zhuangzi was roughly Mencius's contemporary, and the text we know as the Laozi or Daodejing was probably taking shape around this time, though its dating and authorship are much debated, as the previous volume in this series discusses. Curiously, neither Mencius nor Zhuangzi mentions the other, a silence that has puzzled readers for centuries.

Logicians such as Hui Shi, Zhuangzi's friend and sparring partner, who served as minister in Wei under King Hui, the same king whom Mencius visited, and who propounded paradoxes about space, time, and similarity.

The Jixia Academy

Nowhere was the intellectual ferment more concentrated than in Linzi, the capital of Qi. According to Sima Qian and other Han sources, the rulers of Qi, especially King Wei and King Xuan, gathered scholars from across the realm near the Ji Gate (Jimen) of the city, granting them residences, stipends, and honorary ranks, and freeing them to debate and write without the burden of administrative office. This community is known as the Jixia Academy, "beneath the Ji Gate." Sima Qian says that under King Xuan there were "several hundred, nearly a thousand" such scholars, and he names a number of them, including Zou Yan, the theorist of the five phases; Chunyu Kun, a witty courtier who appears in the Mengzi needling Mencius about rites (Mengzi 4A17, 6B6); Tian Pian; Shen Dao; and Huan Yuan.

Modern scholars caution against imagining Jixia as a formal university with a curriculum and faculty. It may have been a looser institution, a form of royal patronage that attracted a shifting population of thinkers. Its prominence in historical memory owes something to later idealization. Still, the evidence that the Tian rulers of Qi cultivated scholars on a large scale is good, and it helps explain why Mencius spent so much of his career in Qi. Whether Mencius was formally a member of the Jixia community is disputed. The Mengzi

never mentions Jixia, and Mencius's own account suggests that he held a ministerial rank (qing) with real, if largely ceremonial, responsibilities rather than a scholarly sinecure. Some historians believe he was associated with the Jixia milieu; others think he deliberately kept his distance from it. What is certain is that in Qi he encountered a court where ideas were taken seriously and where he could hope, at least for a time, to influence a powerful king.

Xunzi, the great Confucian critic of Mencius, would later spend many years at Jixia, where Sima Qian says he was three times honored as "libationer," the senior figure presiding over ritual offerings at gatherings of scholars. The intellectual world of Qi thus links the two greatest Confucians of the Warring States period, even though they never met.

The Confucians After Confucius

When Confucius died, his disciples carried his teaching in different directions. The Han Feizi, a Legalist text of the third century BCE, reports that after Confucius's death the Ru split into eight factions, among them the followers of Zizhang, of Zisi, of Yan, of Meng, of Qidiao, of Zhongliang, of Sun, and of Yuezheng. The "Meng" faction here is almost certainly Mencius's school, and "Sun" probably refers to Xunzi (whose clan name was sometimes written Sun). Whatever the reliability of the list, it shows that by the third century outsiders saw the Confucians as a contentious family rather than a single orthodoxy.

Two figures in the generations between Confucius and Mencius are especially important for understanding him. The first is Zengzi (Zeng Shen), a younger disciple of Confucius, famous for his filial piety and for his habit of examining himself daily on three points: whether he had been loyal in his dealings for others, trustworthy with friends, and diligent in practicing what he had been taught (Analects 1.4). Mencius repeatedly holds up Zengzi as a model of moral courage and integrity (Mengzi 2A2, 4A19, 2B2). The second is Zisi (Kong Ji),

Confucius's grandson, to whom tradition attributed the Zhongyong, the "Doctrine of the Mean" or "Focusing the Familiar," a short text later included among the Four Books. Sima Qian reports that Mencius "received his learning from the disciples of Zisi." Later tradition sometimes made Mencius Zisi's direct pupil, but the chronology makes this nearly impossible, since Zisi probably died before Mencius was born. Mencius himself says only that he was born too late to be a disciple of Confucius, and that he "privately took him as a model" through others (Mengzi 4B22).

The connection between Mencius and Zisi received dramatic confirmation in the late twentieth century. Xunzi, in his chapter "Against the Twelve Masters" (Fei shi'er zi), had attacked Zisi and Mencius together for creating a theory of "five conducts" (wuxing) that was, he said, obscure and without proper basis. For centuries no one knew exactly what he meant. Then, in 1973, a text titled Wuxing ("Five Conducts") was found among the silk manuscripts excavated from a Han tomb at Mawangdui, near Changsha, and in 1993 another version, on bamboo strips, was found in a tomb at Guodian in Hubei that is generally dated to around 300 BCE, that is, within or very near Mencius's lifetime. The Wuxing text discusses five virtues: ren, yi, li, zhi, and sheng (sageliness), and distinguishes between virtues that merely appear in conduct and those that "take form within" the heart. The Mawangdui version even includes a commentary that uses arguments strikingly similar to those of Mencius, including talk of "extending" moral responses. Many scholars now see these texts as evidence of a Zisi-Mencius lineage, though the precise relations remain debated.

The Guodian tomb also yielded a remarkable essay now titled Xing zi ming chu, "Nature Comes from the Decree," which opens by declaring that human nature comes from what Heaven has decreed and that the emotions and the Way arise from nature. This text treats xing (nature) as a set of dispositions, likes and dislikes, that are activated by external things and shaped by teaching, ritual, and music. It does not

say that human nature is good in Mencius's sense, but it shows that discussions of nature, emotions, and moral cultivation were lively among Confucians in exactly the period when Mencius was formulating his views. Mencius did not invent the question of human nature. He entered an ongoing conversation and transformed it.

Heaven, Destiny, and Nature: The Intellectual Stakes

To understand why the question of human nature mattered so much, we need to grasp three terms that run through all of Mencius's thought: tian, ming, and xing.

Tian, usually translated "Heaven," had been for the Zhou the supreme power that conferred and withdrew the right to rule. The doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven (tianming), proclaimed by the Zhou founders to justify their overthrow of Shang, held that Heaven grants rule to the virtuous and takes it away from the wicked. By the Warring States period, tian could refer to a quasi-personal power with intentions, to the order of nature, or to fate and the way things simply are. Mencius uses the word in all these senses. Heaven gives the empire to the worthy (Mengzi 5A5); Heaven is the source of our nature and our heart (Mengzi 6A15, 7A1); Heaven is what happens without anyone doing it (Mengzi 5A6).

Ming, "decree" or "destiny," is closely related. It can mean Heaven's mandate to a ruling house, the span of a person's life, or the circumstances beyond one's control: wealth, rank, health, the timing of one's birth. A central problem of Warring States ethics was how to respond to ming. Should one strive to change one's fate, accept it passively, or concentrate on what lies within one's control? Mencius developed a distinctive answer, distinguishing between things whose attainment depends on our own seeking, namely our virtue, and things whose attainment depends on ming, namely external goods (Mengzi 7A3).

Xing, "nature," derives from a word closely related to sheng, "to be born" or "life." In its earliest uses it seems to have meant the characteristic tendencies of a living thing, the course of development it follows when it is not injured or obstructed. The nature of a tree is to grow tall; the nature of water is to flow downward. Graham argued influentially that for Mencius and his contemporaries, xing referred less to a fixed essence present at birth than to the course of growth proper to a thing over its life. To ask about human xing, then, was to ask what human beings tend to become when they develop properly, and what counts as proper development. This is not merely an academic question. If human nature tends toward selfishness, then a sound political order must restrain it by force. If human nature is neutral, then everything depends on the shaping hand of the ruler. If human nature tends toward goodness, then the task of government is to protect and nourish what is already there. Every political program of the Warring States period rested, explicitly or implicitly, on an answer to this question.

For the followers of Yang Zhu, as Graham reconstructed their position, nature meant above all the spontaneous impulse of a living body to preserve its life and health; to sacrifice that life for external things like power or wealth was to injure one's nature. For the Mohists, human beings were malleable, readily shaped by the incentives and examples set by rulers; Mozi notes that when a king of Chu admired slim waists, his ministers starved themselves to please him. For Gaozi, as we shall see, nature was simply the appetites of life, "food and sex," and morality had to be built from external materials, as cups and bowls are carved from willow wood. Mencius's thesis that human nature is good was his answer to all of them. It claimed that morality is not opposed to our nature, nor imposed upon it, but is its fullest expression.

Zou and Lu: Mencius's Homeland

Mencius was born in Zou, a small state in what is today southwestern Shandong province, just south of Qufu, the capital of Lu and the hometown of Confucius. The modern city of Zoucheng preserves the name and is home to a temple and family mansion of the Meng lineage, as well as a cemetery traditionally identified as the burial ground of the Meng clan. Zou was a minor principality, overshadowed by Lu and squeezed among larger neighbors. The Mengzi records a border clash between Zou and Lu in which Zou's officers were killed while the common people stood by and did nothing; the ruler of Zou asked Mencius whether he should punish the people, and Mencius replied that in years of famine the ruler's officials had let the people starve while the granaries were full, and now the people had simply paid them back. "What goes out from you will return to you," he said, quoting Zengzi (Mengzi 1B12).

The proximity of Zou to Lu was important. Lu was the cultural heartland of the Ru tradition. Its archives preserved the Spring and Autumn Annals, and its court maintained, at least nominally, the ritual traditions associated with the Duke of Zhou, its founding ancestor. Confucius's disciples and their students were active there. A boy growing up in Zou would have been within a day's walk of the living center of Confucian learning. Mencius himself linked his birthplace to Confucius's when he observed that little more than a hundred years separated his own time from the sage's, and that he lived very near the sage's home (Mengzi 7B38).

The Meng clan of Mencius may have had aristocratic ancestry. Later tradition traced it to the Mengsun family, one of the three powerful ministerial houses of Lu descended from Duke Huan of Lu. This genealogy is plausible but unproven. What we can say is that Mencius belonged to the shi class of educated men who lived by their learning, and that, as we will see in the next chapter, he spoke to kings as an equal or superior, conscious of his dignity as a teacher of the Way.

A Timeline of Turbulence

The political events most relevant to Mencius's career can be sketched as follows. The dates are those of the revised chronology now standard among historians; the traditional dates, derived from Sima Qian, differ for several rulers.

Around 372 BCE, according to the conventional dating, Mencius was born in Zou.

In 361 BCE or thereabouts, King Hui of Wei (then still titled Marquis) moved his capital from Anyi to Daliang, which is why his state was also called Liang. He reigned from 369 to 319 BCE, half a century of ambitious but increasingly unsuccessful warfare.

From the 350s BCE, Shang Yang carried out his reforms in Qin, transforming it into a militarized agricultural state.

In 354 to 353 BCE, Wei besieged Handan, the capital of Zhao; Qi intervened and defeated Wei at Guiling.

In 342 or 341 BCE, Qi inflicted a crushing defeat on Wei at Maling. The Wei general Pang Juan died, and the crown prince of Wei, Shen, was captured. This is the disaster that King Hui laments to Mencius when he says that in the east his state was defeated by Qi and his eldest son died (Mengzi 1A5). In the following years Wei also lost territory to Qin in the west and suffered defeat at the hands of Chu in the south.

In 334 BCE, the rulers of Wei and Qi met at Xuzhou and recognized each other as kings.

Around 320 BCE, near the end of his reign, King Hui of Liang received Mencius. The king died in 319 BCE and was succeeded by his son King Xiang, whom Mencius met once and found unimpressive (Mengzi 1A6).

In 319 BCE, according to the revised chronology, King Xuan of Qi came to the throne; he reigned until 301 BCE. Mencius spent an extended period at his court.

In 316 BCE, King Kuai of Yan, persuaded by advisers that he could emulate the legendary sage-king Yao, who had yielded the throne to the worthy Shun, abdicated in favor of his chief minister Zizhi. The result was chaos and civil war.

In 314 BCE, Qi invaded Yan, ostensibly to restore order, and conquered it with astonishing speed. The occupation turned brutal, the people of Yan rose in revolt, the other states threatened to intervene, and Qi was forced to withdraw. Mencius was deeply implicated in the episode, as we will see in Chapter Two, and his relations with King Xuan never recovered.

Around 312 BCE or somewhat later, Mencius left Qi.

Around 289 BCE, according to the conventional dating, Mencius died, perhaps in Zou.

In 221 BCE, Qin completed the conquest of the other states and its king proclaimed himself the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huang, the subject of a later volume in this series.

The Moral Situation

Set against this background, the urgency of Mencius's message comes into focus. He lived in a world where the most successful states were those that most ruthlessly harnessed their populations for war, where advisers were valued for their ability to deliver territory and revenue, and where the old bonds of ritual and kinship were dissolving. It was, in many ways, a modern world: bureaucratic, competitive, rationalizing, driven by the logic of power and profit. The great question of the age was who would unify "all under Heaven," and most observers assumed that the answer would be whoever built the most efficient war machine. In the end, they were right: Qin won.

Mencius bet against that logic. He argued that the state which cared for its people would win their loyalty, that people would flock to a benevolent ruler "as water flows downward" (Mengzi 1A6), and that the people of oppressed states would welcome such a ruler's armies as liberators. He argued that a ruler who asked "How can I profit my state?" would set in motion a chain of selfish calculation that would end in his own murder (Mengzi 1A1). He argued that moral goodness is not a luxury for peaceful times but the very foundation of lasting order.

Was he naive? Many in his own time thought so. Sima Qian reports that the rulers of the day regarded Mencius's teaching as "pedantic, remote, and out of touch with the realities of affairs." Yet history offers a curious verdict. The Qin dynasty, built on the Legalist model, collapsed within fifteen years of its founder's death, overthrown by a rebellion that began among conscripted laborers. The Han dynasty that followed retained much of the Qin administrative machinery but clothed it increasingly in Confucian ideals, and later Chinese political thought would cite the fall of Qin as the classic proof that a state cannot rule by force alone. The Han scholar Jia Yi, in his famous essay "The Faults of Qin" (Guo Qin lun), concluded that Qin fell because "it did not practice humaneness and righteousness, and the conditions for seizing power and for holding it are different." That is a Mencian verdict.

The sprouts that Mencius tried to nourish in the hearts of kings did not flourish in his own lifetime. But they were not destroyed. Like the trees of Ox Mountain, which he described as forever trying to grow back despite the axes and the grazing cattle, they kept returning. The rest of this book is the story of how and why.

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