

THE LIFE OF MENCIUS

By Qu Chunli



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The portrait of Mencius

Preface to the Chinese Edition

It has been scarcely two years since Mr. Qu Chunli published his *Life of Confucius*, and now its companion-piece *Life of Mencius* is produced from under his pen. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my hearty congratulations.

Over the past ten years, Mr. Qu has been engaged in the work of foreign affairs and tourism at Jining City, Shandong Province, the historical site of the ancient states of Zou and Lu and the homeland of Confucius and Mencius. Inspired by an immense admiration and veneration for the sages and philosophers of old, Mr. Qu has read a great amount of historical documents relevant to their lives and deeds, and this he often did by snatching every leisured hour he could from a very active public life. He made long and arduous journeys uphill and down dales, collecting folklore about these sages and philosophers so dear to his heart. As a result, he has gained such an intimate knowledge of the local milieu—historical relics, institutions, customs and folklore—that he can almost recount them one by one upon his fingers. The reason that he could produce his two creative works on Confucius and Mencius in such a rapid succession is simply because he had a rich store of knowledge at his command, to say nothing of his literary talent. As Mr. Kuang Yaming pointed out, in writing his *Life of Confucius*, Mr. Qu had time, place and people in his favour. I would say, the same is true of his writing of *Life of Mencius*.

In the sphere of Confucianism Mencius ranks second only to its founder Confucius; hence posterity looks up to him as the Second Sage. In the book *Mencius* he is quoted as saying, "I have not had the good fortune to have been a disciple of Confucius, I have learned indirectly from him through others." In the *Records of the Historian*, Mencius is said to have studied under a disciple of Zi Si; as Zi Si was Confucius' grandson, so he may be counted as Confucius' disciple fourth removed. After Confucius' death, few people were able to carry forward his thought and theory in spite of the fact that he had so many disciples in his lifetime. By the Warring States period, Confucianism had been in a fair way to decline, so much so that, to quote from Mencius, "The teachings current in the Empire are those of either the school of Yang or the school of Mo Di." Undaunted by such a grim

situation, Mencius, who avowed himself to be an orthodox follower of Confucius, came forward to repudiate Yang Zhu and Mo Di while at the same time expounding the thought and theory of Confucius, thereby drawing a large following to him. He went lobbying among the feudal princes, sometimes going so far as to criticize and reprimand them to their faces as if he alone had the last word to say on any problem at issue. We have every reason to believe that it was precisely because Mencius inherited and further developed Confucius' thought and theory that the banner of Confucianism was not laid down and that Confucianism could hold its own without being crowded out by the many schools of thought that had one after another emerged on the philosophical scene.

Mencius was confronted with a much more difficult and grim situation than Confucius had been when the feudal rulers of the bigger states competed with one another in a race for hegemony while the rulers of the lesser states could do nothing more than keep themselves and their people out of harm's way. Faced with such a situation, Mencius should go and preach his doctrine of following the examples of the former kings and of practising benevolence and righteousness. This cannot but be regarded as impractical, not to say pedantic. Such is Sima Qian's comment on Mencius in his *Records* when he describes about his life: "This was the time when Qin was employing Lord Shang to enrich the state and strengthen the army, Chu and Wei were employing Wu Qi to defeat their weaker enemies, King Wei and King Xuan of Qi were employing men like Sun Bin and Tian Ji, while all the other states turned east to pay homage to Qi. The whole empire was divided into alliances with or against Qin and fighting was held in high regard. Mencius, who spoke of the virtues of Yao and Shun and the Three Dynasties, could not get on with these rulers." Thus, throughout his life, Mencius only managed to tour through the states like Qi, Wei, Song and Teng and it was impossible for him to realize his political ideal of bringing the whole empire to peace and order in the end. He had to retire to Zou, his homeland, where he spent his last years, expounding the *Book of Songs* and *Book of Documents*, transmitting the teachings of Confucius and, with Wan Zhang and other disciples, collecting his sayings into seven books, known to history as the *Mencius*.

In political practice, Mencius may not have accomplished anything worthy of note, but this can in no way detract from him as a

great philosopher. His teachings in the *Mencius* exert far-reaching and important influence on later generations, even though they contain certain ideas which cannot be considered positive. Although his philosophy is tinged heavily with idealism, sometimes bordering on mysticism, yet it nurtured and encouraged many people with noble ideals and high aspirations over the past ages. To this day not a few of his sayings have been cherished by the Chinese people as the golden rule.

Benevolent government forms the corner-stone of Mencius' political philosophy. There is no denying the fact that his theory of benevolent government is based on the class viewpoint, that is, "There are those who use their minds and there are those who use their muscles. The former rule; the latter are ruled," (*Teng Wen Gong* Part I) and "There will be men in authority and there will be the common people. Without the former, there will be none to rule over the latter; without the latter, there will be none to support the former." (*ibid*) It is true, such a viewpoint is not without its justification when humanity entered upon its initial period of civilization, with different classes coming into being; but unfortunately it played into the hands of all the subsequent exploiting classes which used this theory to justify their rule. However, Mencius' theory of benevolent government still contains things that hold true for all times. For instance, his thesis on the important role of the common people. He points out, "The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler." (*Jin Xin* Part II) This, of course, is not to say that the people must necessarily be more important than the ruling prince but that the ruling prince must take the people fully into account. What Mencius actually means by this is that to distinguish a benevolent government from a tyrannical one, the ultimate criterion should be whether or not the ruler can ensure that "his people always have sufficient food in good years and escape starvation in bad." (*King Hui of Liang* Part I) In his interview with King Hui of Liang, Mencius demanded of the king, "What is the point of mentioning the word 'profit'?" We must not take him to mean that he is opposed to all profits and gains without discrimination; what he is opposed to is the fact that a ruler should seek profits at the expense of the people, such as waging war on neighbouring states, exacting heavy tax from his people etc., etc. According to him, "There is a way to win the Empire; win the people and you will win the Empire." On the contrary, "If a

ruler ill-uses his people to an extreme degree, he will be murdered and his state annexed; if he does it to a lesser degree, his person will be in danger and his territory reduced. Such rulers will be given the posthumous names of 'You' (benighted) and 'Li' (tyrannical)." (*Li Lou* Part I) From this Mencius further propounds his point of argument that the relationship between the ruler and his subjects is determined by how the former treats the latter, to wit, "If a prince treats his subjects as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a stranger. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy." (*ibid*) Hence, there is no absolute or permanent rule for any ruler on the throne. If the ruler practises no benevolence and if he ill-uses his subjects, then his subjects will have the right to disown him as their sovereign. And that is why when King Xuan of Qi asked Mencius "Is regicide permissible?" his answer was "A man who mutilates benevolence is a mutilator, while one who cripples righteousness is a crippler. He who is both a mutilator and a crippler is an 'outcast'. I have indeed heard of the punishment of the 'outcast Zhou', but I have not heard of any regicide." (*King Hui of Liang* Part II) The meaning implied is obvious. Implicit in this oblique answer of Mencius is indeed a veiled threat to the feudal ethical code so much sanctified by the Confucians themselves. No wonder that Zhu Yuan Zhang, the founder of the Ming Dynasty, once he was firmly in the saddle, hastened to have the concerned text of the Mencius bowdlerized in every possible way by his Confucians-ministers. For an ancient philosopher of Mencius' calibre, it is indeed worthwhile to write something about him.

But it is more difficult to write of the life of Mencius than the *Life of Confucius*, since Confucius enjoys greater reputation than does Mencius and there exist documents and materials galore about his life and deeds; even in the *Records of the Historian*, the pages devoted to the life of Confucius are several dozen times more than those devoted to Mencius; and there is no lack of books on Confucius by later generations, either. Not so in the case of Mencius, however. Today, the only authentic material available for the writing of his biography can be found chiefly in the book *Mencius* itself, which records mainly Mencius' disputations with different characters; there are seldom dramatic events mentioned there (as is the case of Confucius) for the development of a good story. Be that as it may, it is significant for Mr.

Qu to portray Mencius as a man with a strong sense of justice, who always stood by the interests of the people and attached importance to their role as material goods producers; a man whose moral courage induced him to criticize the ruling princes without any scruple, so much so that his scathing remarks made one of his victims so embarrassed that he "looked to the right and left, and spoke of other matters." In all this, it can be said that the author has captured the spirit of the man. Furthermore, Mr. Qu can make a good use of the various literary devices, such as imagination, montage and exaggeration, to characterize Mencius as an eloquent speaker with a propensity for disputation, and the book is thus made highly readable. I think, therefore, this *Life of Mencius* will receive a warm reception from the readership just as its companion-piece *Life of Confucius* does.

Yuan Shishuo
April 20, 1992

Contents

<i>Chapter One</i>	1
Champion of Justice Mengsun Rescues a Man in Peril; Greedy by Nature Fu Puren Amasses Ill-Gotten Wealth	
<i>Chapter Two</i>	18
Influenced by an Unwholesome Environment, Meng Ke Neg- lects His Studies; Concerned About Her Son's Education, Madam Zhang Moves House Three Times	
<i>Chapter Three</i>	31
Meng Ke Plays Truant; His Aggrieved Mother Teaches Him a Lesson by Cutting Up All Her Finished Yarn	
<i>Chapter Four</i>	46
Meng Ke Settles Down to Serious Study; Squire Fu Gets Hoist on His Own Petard	
<i>Chapter Five</i>	61
Master and Servants Conspire Behind Closed Doors in a Murder Plot; As Guests at the Court, Teacher and Students Expound Their Views on Benevolent Government	
<i>Chapter Six</i>	75
Zeng Xuan Voices His Lofty Ideals on Top of a Mountain; Meng Ke Plays Music to Express His Noble Sentiments	
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	85
Duke Mu Turns Down Honest Advice; Squire Fu Clings Obstinate to His Evil Ways	
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	99
Xia Long Breaks the Law and Gets His Just Deserts; Meng Ke Turns Disaster into a Blessing	

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter Nine</i>	111
Zeng Xuan Puts His Pupil Through His Paces; Duan Ping Questions Her Spouse to Test His Aspirations	
<i>Chapter Ten</i>	123
Jue Hu Is Punished for Committing Arson; Xia Long Attempts Murder Only to Be Hoist on His Own Petard	
<i>Chapter Eleven</i>	134
Abiding by His Principle of Tolerance, Tian Yezi Lets Xia Long Go Free; Acting on His Promise, Duke Mu Presents Meng Ke with Gifts Galore	
<i>Chapter Twelve</i>	145
Duanping Gives Birth to a Son, to the Joy of the Whole Family; Mencius Pours out His Grievances Against a Corrupt Govern- ment at the Graveside of His Worthy Teacher	
<i>Chapter Thirteen</i>	156
Mencius Accepts Gongdu Zi as His Disciple in the Capital of Lu; The Master Heads off a Disaster Thanks to the Disciple's Intervention	
<i>Chapter Fourteen</i>	168
Loyal to an Evil Master as Ever, Jue Hu Clings to His Evil Ways; Turning Over a New Leaf, a Reformed Xia Long Performs a Good Deed	
<i>Chapter Fifteen</i>	180
An Arrogant Youth Learns a Bitter Lesson; A Wise Schoolmaster Imparts His Wisdom to His Pupils	
<i>Chapter Sixteen</i>	192
Three Students of Mencius Impress the Duke with Their Martial Skill; Teacher and Students Ascend Mount Tai to Watch the Sunrise	

<i>Chapter Seventeen</i>	200
Yezi Performs One More Charitable Deed for the Famine-Stricken;	
Dongye Tries to Mislead an Addle-headed Prince	
<i>Chapter Eighteen</i>	209
Mencius Settles a Poser for Wulu Zi;	
Zhongzi Learns Martial Arts from Gongsun	
<i>Chapter Nineteen</i>	221
A Princess Falls Victim to Love at First Sight;	
Two Childhood Friends Are Further Bound to an Engagement	
<i>Chapter Twenty</i>	228
Duke Mu Falls into a Trap Set by a Willy Minister;	
The Lovesick Princess Grabs the First Man Who Comes to Hand	
<i>Chapter Twenty-One</i>	235
Duke Mu Tries to Train His Intractable Heir;	
A Loyal Minister Escorts the Heir to School	
<i>Chapter Twenty-Two</i>	246
Duke Mu's Spoilt Heir Becomes a Serious Student at Mencius' School;	
A Marshal's Delinquent Son Undergoes Hard Training	
<i>Chapter Twenty-Three</i>	255
Xiahou Recommends a Good and Wise Man to the Duke of Zou;	
Dongye Harbours Malicious Intent Against His Political Rival	
<i>Chapter Twenty-Four</i>	264
Mencius Suffers One More Setback in His Quest for a Political Career;	
Zhang Comforts Her Son and Urges Him to Forge Ahead	
<i>Chapter Twenty-Five</i>	272
Gu Tu Pleads in Vain with His Father to Employ Mencius;	
Mencius Stops at Qi in His Tour of the Empire	

<i>Chapter Twenty-Six</i>	281
Mencius Excoriates the Ills of the Times to King Wei's Face; He Eulogizes the Good and Wise of Antiquity	
<i>Chapter Twenty-Seven</i>	293
At the Metropolis Inn Mencius Sets Forth His Views on Current Events; In the Wilds Gongdu Zi Encounters His Long-Sought Enemy	
<i>Chapter Twenty-Eight</i>	300
Gongsun Conducts an Exercise in Battle Formation; Haoshen Throws a Dinner Party in Honor of Mencius	
<i>Chapter Twenty-Nine</i>	307
Kuang Zhang Asks About Self-Denying Purity by Quoting a Local Example; Mencius Stresses Filial Piety as a Must for Self-Cultivation	
<i>Chapter Thirty</i>	320
King Wei Goes Hunting on a Snowy Day in the Company of His Ministers; Gongsun Executes a Feat of Stone-Throwing to Rescue a Beast of Good Omen	
<i>Chapter Thirty-One</i>	331
In Collusion with His Superior, Zhuang Bao Devises a Sinister Scheme to Incriminate a Court Rival; Out of a Humane and Righteous Heart, Tian Ji Urges His Majesty to Assist a Neighboring State	
<i>Chapter Thirty-Two</i>	340
A Thief Cries "Stop Thief!" a Malevolent Courtier Cooks up a False Charge Against His Innocent Colleague; Mencius' Worthy Disciples Explain in Simple Terms the Es- sence of the Rules of Propriety	
<i>Chapter Thirty-Three</i>	352
In Setting Forth His Views on Good Government, Mencius Defines a "Heaven-Appointed Officer"; His Doctrines Making No Headway, the Master Makes an	

Abrupt Departure for Home

Chapter Thirty-Four 363

Mencius Goes to Song to Preach Benevolent Government But
Meets with a Cold Reception;
The Crown Prince of Teng Asks the Master to Clarify Some
Moral and Intellectual Problems

Chapter Thirty-Five 375

In Fawning on His Superior, the Crafty Minister Courts
Disaster;
Nobody's Enemy But His Own, a Benighted Duke Bemoans
His Sudden Bereavements

Chapter Thirty-Six 382

Home Again, Mencius Resumes His Time-Honored Job of
Teaching;
His Favorite Disciple Questions Him on the Rites

Chapter Thirty-Seven 392

Duke Wen of Teng Pays Mencius a Visit and Asks About Ways
of Government;
Bi Zhan Consults the Master About the Nine-Squares System
of Dividing the Land

Chapter Thirty-Eight 401

Convinced by Mencius' Arguments, Chen Xiang Abandons His
Original Belief;
With the Courage of His Convictions, Mencius Leads the Fight
Against Foreign Invasion

Chapter Thirty-Nine 412

Helping a Tyrant to Do Evil, Wu Xiao Fights for a Lost Cause;
Counting on Three Favorable Conditions, Mencius Helps the
Weak Against the Strong

Chapter Forty 422

Duke Wen Rewards Mencius with Gold for Services Rendered;
Mencius Continues His Tour of the States Propagating His
Gospel of Benevolence

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter Forty-One</i>	432
King Hui of Liang Regales Mencius with a Musical Performance at a Dinner Party; The Master Preaches Benevolent Government to the King, But His Words Fall on Deaf Ears	
<i>Chapter Forty-Two</i>	443
On Witnessing Brutalities Done to the Penal Laborers, Gongdu Zi Strikes a Blow for the Weak; Satiated with Food and Pleasure, One of King Hui's Concubines Seeks Love Elsewhere	
<i>Chapter Forty-Three</i>	452
Inconstant in Her Love, Lady Jian Abandons the Old for the Young; Casting off His Old Self, a Remolded Xia Long Performs a Good Deed for His Erstwhile Foe	
<i>Chapter Forty-Four</i>	462
Bai Gui Talks Big About His Merits in Curbing the Flood; Gao Zi Debates with Mencius on the Question of Human Nature	
<i>Chapter Forty-Five</i>	474
Mencius Explains the Rank System of the Zhou House to One of His Admirers; King Hui of Liang Dies, Nursing a Deep Grievance Against His Incestuous Son	
<i>Chapter Forty-Six</i>	484
The Murderer Wu Fa Tries to Shift the Blame Onto Gongdu Zi; Righteousness Personified, Mencius Adheres to His Righteous Way	
<i>Chapter Forty-Seven</i>	495
Mencius Urges King Xuan to Practice Benevolent Government; Master and Disciple Discuss the Way of Self-Cultivation as Befits a Sage	

- Chapter Forty-Eight* 508
Drawn to the Beauty of Virtue, King Xuan Takes an Ugly
Woman As His Wife;
In a High Position As Minister of Qi, Mencius Forgets Not His
Duty As a Son
- Chapter Forty-Nine* 521
Mencius' Mother Dies in Qi, and Mencius Honors Her with a
Splendid Funeral;
Defeated by the Allied Forces of Six States, a Bellicose Mon-
arch Draws a Bitter Lesson
- Chapter Fifty* 532
Abandoning Office, Mencius Returns Home and Devotes His
Last Years to Teaching and Writing;
In Memory of Their Dear Departed, Wan Zhang Leaves
Words with His Fellow Students at Parting

Chapter One

Champion of Justice Mengsun Rescues a Man in Peril; Greedy by Nature Fu Puren Amasses Ill-Gotten Wealth

Legend has it that along the east side of the broad highway leading from the capital of the State of Lu to the capital of the State of Zou there stretched a mountain chain of medium height and breadth which meandered from south to north for some ten *li**. With its nine towering peaks of similar shape, ranged at almost equal distances from each other along the ridge, the mountain resembled nine huge dragons flying south, their heads raised in the air. Hence the local people called it Nine-Dragon Mountain.

On its western side, close to the highway, was a hillock shaped like a saddle, known locally as Saddle Hill. Nestled at the foot of this hill to the west was a community of some hundred households called Wild Duck Village.

At the western end of the village stood an imposing, spacious courtyard with walls of rammed earth. Inside was a tall locust tree with a mass of branches and leaves. It was early autumn in 382 B.C., and the leaves of the tree were beginning to turn yellow.

The door opened and out came a young woman of 24 or so. With a slim figure and fine, delicate features, she looked anything but common, despite her coarse attire. She gazed at the sun sinking in the west, shading her eyes with one hand as she did so. She heaved a long sigh, and her face clouded over with anxiety.

The woman was surnamed Zhang, and she was the wife of Mengsun Ji. The latter, being of the Mengsun clan, was related to the eminent family of the Duke of Lu. The woman was waiting anxiously for the return of her husband, who had been out the whole day.

At the moment Ji was on his way home, walking briskly, his heart full of expectation. He had been to the capital of the State of Zou, where he had been collecting rent from his tenants. With five *yi*** of

* *Li*, a Chinese unit of length, equal 1/2 kilometre.

** *Yi*—ancient measure of gold, approximately equivalent to 24 ounces.