MOZI

BASIC WRITINGS

TRANSLATED BY

BURTON WATSON

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TRANSLATIONS FROM THE ASIAN CLASSICS

Translations from the Asian Classics

OUTLINE OF EARLY CHINESE HISTORY

(Dates and entries before 841 B.C. are traditional)

B.C.	*Dynasty*		
2852		Culture Heroes	Fu Xi, inventor of writing, fishing, trapping.
2737			Shen Nong, inventor of agriculture, commerce.
2697			Yellow Emperor.
2357		Sage Kings	Yao.
2255			Shun.
2205	Xia Dynasty		Yu, virtuous founder of dynasty.
1818			Jie, degenerate terminator of dynasty.
1766	Shang or Yin Dynasty		King Tang, virtuous founder of dynasty.
[c. 1300]			[Beginning of archeological evidence.]
1154			Zhou, degenerate terminator of dynasty.

	Three Dynasties			
1122				King Wen, virtuous founder of dynasty.
				King Wu, virtuous founder of dynasty.
1115				King Cheng, virtuous founder of dynasty.
			Western Zhou	(Duke of Zhou, regent to King Cheng)
878		Zhou Dynasty		King Li.
781				King You.
771				
722				Spring and Autumn period (722–481).
551				Period of the "hundred philosophers" (551–c. 233): Confucius, Mozi, Laozi (?), Mencius, Zhuangzi, Hui Shi, Shang Yang, Gongsun Long, Xunzi, Han Feizi.
			Eastern Zhou	
403				Warring States period (403–221).
4th to 3rd cent.				Extensive wall-building and waterworks by Qin and other states.
249				Lü Buwei, prime minister of Qin.
221		Qin Dynasty (221–207 B.C.)		The First Emperor; Li Si, prime minister.
214				The Great Wall completed.

Mozi

Contents

INTRODUCTION

Almost nothing is known about the life of Mo Di, or Master Mo, the founder of the Mohist school of philosophy. A number of anecdotes in which he figures are found in the *Mozi*, the book compiled by his disciples to preserve the teachings of their master, and other late Zhou and early Han works contain scattered references to him and his school. But they tell us little about the man himself. He seems to have lived some time between the death of Confucius in 479 B.C. and the birth of Mencius in 372 B.C., flourishing probably in the latter half of the fifth century B.C. He is identified by some writers as a native of the state of Song, by others as a native of Lu, the birthplace of Confucius. The *Huainanzi* (ch. 21), a work of the second century B.C., says that he first studied under the scholars of the Confucian school (though in later years he bitterly attacked the Confucians), and certainly the frequency with which he quotes from the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of Documents* would seem to indicate that at some point he received thorough instruction in these ancient texts. Like Confucius and Mencius, he apparently traveled a good deal, visiting one after another of the feudal rulers of the time in an attempt to gain a hearing for his ideas, and we are

told that for a while he served as a high minister in the state of Song. He was particularly anxious to spread his doctrine of universal love and to persuade the rulers of his day to cease their incessant attacks upon each other. The *Mozi* (sec. 50), for example, relates that, when he heard that Chu was planning an attack on Song, he walked for ten days and ten nights to reach the court of Chu, where he succeeded in persuading the ruler to call off the expedition.

Mozi and his followers believed that such attacks could be stopped not only by preaching sermons on universal love, but by strengthening the defenses of vulnerable states so as to diminish the chances of a profitable victory for aggressors. Thus they hastened to the aid of besieged states, and in time became experts on methods of warfare. They formed close-knit, disciplined bands (the school was said to have split into three groups after Mozi's death), headed by an "elder" whose word was law and who, when death drew near, selected his successor from among the group. Later followers of the school also took up the study of logic, though perhaps, as Arthur Waley has suggested, this was less from any intrinsic interest in the subject than from a desire "to arm themselves against modernist attack."[1]

The *Mozi*, a work in fifteen chapters and seventy-one sections, of which eighteen are now lost, reflects these interests of the later Mohist school, containing a number of sections on logic and military science. Of more importance in the history of Chinese thought, however, are the sections which expound the political and ethical ideas of Mozi himself, and it is from these sections that the excerpts translated here have been selected.

The sections chosen deal with eleven topics, each topic being stated in the title of the section. Each section is divided

[1]Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1934), p. 65.

into three subsections except the last, that entitled "Against Confucians," which is divided into two. Over the centuries, however, some of these subsections have been lost, so that only six of the eleven sections are complete today. The subsections within each section often differ in wording, order of ideas, and even slightly in content. But on the whole they resemble each other so closely that they appear to be no more than slightly different versions of a single lecture or sermon. As stated above, the Mohist school was said to have split into three groups after the death of its founder, and scholars have surmised that the three treatments of each topic may represent the doctrines of Mozi as they were handed down in each of the three groups. In the translation I have, in order to avoid repetition, in most cases translated only the subsection which seemed to contain the most interesting and complete exposition of each topic, though in a few cases I have translated two subsections dealing with a single topic. All but the last section contain frequent uses of the formula "Master Mozi said," which would seem to indicate that they were written down not by Mozi himself but by his disciples, though it is not altogether impossible that Mozi wrote some of them himself, and that the phrase was added later by redactors.

Before discussing the specific doctrines expounded in the portion of the work presented here, I wish to say a word about Mozi's method of argumentation. In the section entitled "Against Fatalism," Mozi lists three "tests" or criteria which are to be used to determine the validity of any theory: 1) its origin, by which he means whether or not it conforms with what we know of the practices of the sage kings of antiquity; 2) its validity, i.e., whether or not it conforms with what we know from the evidence of the senses; 3) its applicability, i.e., whether, when put into practice, it will bring benefit to the state and the people. Though Mozi does not

always employ all three in each case, these are the principal criteria upon which he bases his arguments.

The modern reader will probably experience the greatest difficulty in accepting the pertinence of Mozi's first criterion. All of us today tend to be skeptical of "what history proves," since we have seen history cited to prove so many disparate and even contradictory assertions. Moreover the "history" which Mozi cites to prove his arguments is often, even to the eye of the nonspecialist, patently no more than legend and myth. We must remember, however, that in Mozi's day, so far as we can gather, the majority of educated Chinese accepted without question the following two assumptions: 1) that, at certain periods in the past, enlightened rulers had appeared in China to order the nation and raise Chinese society to a level of peace, prosperity, and moral vigor unparalleled in later days; 2) that, in spite of the paucity of reliable accounts, it was still possible to discover, mainly through the records contained in the *Book of Odes* and *Book of Documents*, how these rulers had acted and why—that is, to determine "the way of the ancient sage kings"—and to attempt to put it into practice in the present age. The appeal to the example of antiquity, which Mozi so often uses to clinch his argument, therefore carried enormous weight in his day, and continued to do so in Chinese philosophy down to the present century. By making such an appeal, he was following the approved practice of the thinkers of his age, and we may suppose that, if his listeners accepted the validity of his account of antiquity, they must have felt strongly compelled to accept his conclusions.

The second criterion, the appeal to the evidence of the senses, he uses much less frequently, and then often with disastrous results, as when he argues for the existence of ghosts and spirits on the basis of the fact that so many people have reportedly seen and heard them.

His third criterion, that of practicability, needs no comment, since it is as vital a part of argumentative writing today as it was in Mozi's time.

The eleven sections representing the basic doctrines of Mozi are entitled: "Honoring the Worthy," "Identifying with One's Superior," "Universal Love," "Against Offensive Warfare," "Moderation in Expenditures," "Moderation in Funerals," "The Will of Heaven," "Explaining Ghosts," "Against Music," "Against Fatalism," and "Against Confucians."

As will be noticed, Mozi was "agin" quite a number of things, and this fact provides a valuable clue to his personality and the character of his thought. He seems to have been a passionately sincere but rather dour and unimaginative man who, observing the social and moral ills of his time and the suffering which they brought to so many of the common people, felt personally called upon to attempt a cure. One way of accomplishing his aim, he believed, was to attack the abuses of the feudal aristocrats and literati. So deep is his compassion for the common people, and so outspoken his criticisms of their rulers, that some scholars have recently been led to speculate that Mo, which means "tattoo," may not be a surname at all, but an appellation indicating that Master Mo was an ex-convict who had undergone the punishment of being tattooed, and flaunted the fact in the face of society by adopting the name of his penalty. This suggestion, interesting as it is, seems highly dubious, for, no matter how great his compassion for the common people may have been, his teachings were meant primarily for the ears of the rulers, and if he hoped to gain a hearing among them he would hardly have proclaimed himself a breaker of their laws. If Mo is not a surname, it is probably an appellation adopted by Mozi, or given to him by his contemporaries, the meaning of which is now lost.

It is true, however, that Mozi and his followers seem to have taken a far sterner and less compromising attitude toward the ruling class of the time and its foibles than did the members of the other philosophical schools. The Mohists condemned the music, dances, and luxurious living of the aristocracy because such pastimes taxed the wealth and energy of the common people and added nothing to the material welfare of the nation. (They failed to note the benefit which such pastimes provided for the class of merchants, artisans, entertainers, and servants who catered to such tastes, since for the Mohists, as for almost all early Chinese thinkers, the only common people who deserved consideration were the farmers.) They denounced offensive warfare for the same reasons, because it was a burden and an expense to the people and provided little in the way of material benefit, and they likewise condemned elaborate funerals and all other "unnecessary" expenditures. They attacked fatalistic thinking because they wanted men to believe that wealth and good fortune came only in response to virtuous deeds, and opposed the Confucian scholars because Confucianism taught such fatalistic doctrines and encouraged music and elaborate funeral rites.

Such is the negative side of Mozi's thought, a listing of the ideas and practices which he believed must be abandoned before society could be restored to peace and order. On the positive side, the first principle which he enunciates is that called "honoring the worthy"—the duty of rulers to seek out men of wisdom and virtue and employ them in their governments. This would seem to be a reasonable and innocuous enough doctrine. By Mozi's time, the right of certain aristocratic families to maintain hereditary possession of ministerial posts in the feudal governments had already been seriously challenged, and many rulers were doing just what Mozi recommended—surrounding

themselves with men chosen from the lower aristocracy or the common people who would be less encumbered by family ties and feel a greater personal devotion to the ruler who had promoted them. And no other philosophical school could be expected to take exception to Mozi's doctrine, since each would no doubt interpret "worthy men" to mean "our party"—except perhaps the Daoists and farmer-recluses, who professed not to be interested in acquiring government posts anyway. Mozi may have been among the first to give clear and unequivocal expression to this ideal, which became a commonplace in Chinese political thought. But the growing conviction that character and ability rather than birth alone make the man was very much in the air at the time, and had already been stated by Confucius.

Mozi's second principle, "identifying with one's superior," is likewise less controversial than it may appear to modern readers in the West. There is a very strong strain of authoritarianism in early Chinese philosophy. Independence of thought and action, for the lower classes at least, is a rarely expressed concept in the works of the period—the only example that comes to mind is Confucius' dictum: "The commander of the forces of a large state may be carried off, but the will of even the common man cannot be taken from him" (*Analects* IX, 25). The Daoists, it is true, talk much of freedom of thought and action, but it is a freedom which ignores or transcends the social order, not one that functions effectively within it. The concept of the hierarchical social order itself, the neat pyramid of classes and functionaries topped by the Son of Heaven, was an ideal that apparently no thinker dreamed of challenging. Therefore when Mozi urges that each group in society must accept its standards of judgment and take orders from the group above it, he is expressing an assumption common to Mohists, Confucians, and, later, Legalists alike. Advice could, and indeed should, flow freely upward in the

hierarchy. But decisions, in normal times at least, come only from above. Each individual and group in society, if he or it goes morally awry, may thus be checked and corrected by the group above. (Needless to say, Chinese society did not always function in this way, which explains why Mozi and others spent so much time expounding this ideal.)

But what happens if the man at the very top goes awry? The Confucians believed that in that case, and in that case alone, the normal process may be reversed and a new leader may rise up from the lower ranks to replace the man at the top who has, by his misrule, disqualified himself for the position he holds. The new leader is able to do this because of his superior virtue, which wins for him both the support of society and the sanction of Heaven. Mozi recognizes the same process, but pays less attention to the leader himself, who is only an agent of divine retribution, than to the power directing the process, the supernatural power of Heaven and the spirits.

Which brings us to Mozi's religious views. He asserts that nature spirits and the ghosts of the dead exist, that they take cognizance of all human activities, and that they have the power to reward or punish any individual for his deeds. Heading the hierarchy of the supernatural world he envisions a deity called God, the Lord on High, or Heaven, who creates all beings, loves all beings, and desires their welfare, working towards that end through the earthly representatives of the deity, the Son of Heaven and his officers. There is nothing novel about such views; they are striking only as a reaffirmation of traditional religious beliefs. If we turn to the *Odes* and *Documents*, we will find such assumptions underlying almost every line, while the mass of early historical legends preserved in the *Zuozhuan* abounds in stories of spirits who returned from the land of the dead to take personal revenge upon their enemies. Yet the very insistence