

## PROLOGUE

This volume concerns the *Mencius* and its various interpretations and influences in the long history of hermeneutics in China. The Prologue explicates two key points—“the *Mencius*” and the “history of its interpretations and influences.”

*First*, the text of *Mencius* is always personally alive as Mencius (371?-289 B.C.) for us to interpret and to influence us. Historically, Chinese hermeneutics has taken it for granted that Mencius lives in his text and the text of *Mencius* shows Mencius the man, so much so that to read the text is to interpret it in a certain manner, which in turn influences the interpreter’s life. The text is the person and the person the text. The “question” of authorship has been moot throughout the ancient years of hermeneutics. This amounts to saying that the *Mencius* is always alive; this is what it means to read the Classics. To read the *Mencius* is to understand and to be influenced by Mencius the man.

Thus, *secondly*, “*Mencius* (the writing)” is “Mencius (the man),” forever alive to influence its readers, in ages past and today. To explicate the *Mencius* is tantamount to explicating how various interpretations of the *Mencius* have exerted historic influence throughout the past 2,300 odd years. In other words, to understand the *Mencius* is inevitably to survey the *history* of Mencian interpretations and influences. We glibly call this the “history of hermeneutics of the *Mencius*.”

This history of Mencian interpretative influences is worldwide—first in China, then in Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia, and the world beyond. In this historical development, hermeneutical history in China claims priority both in significance and in chronology. Thus, this volume confines itself to surveying various Mencian interpretations and influences *in China* throughout its long hermeneutical history.

Obviously, the important phrase, “the hermeneutical history of the *Mencius*,” has two terms representing two key issues, “the *Mencius*” and “interpretive influence,” or rather, the hermeneutical influences of Mencius on us today and those of “Mencius” in many historical ages. Thus, this volume is divided into two Parts, “Mencius the Text, the Man, the Ideas” and “Mencius in Historical Context.”

Part I explains what constitutes “Mencius” by understanding the text of the *Mencius*. Such an understanding exhibits one interpretive influence of *Mencius*, that among us today, specifically on myself, a student of the text for more than a quarter of a century. Mencius strikes me as a righteous man who incisively, instinctively, argued, as he was goaded by the exigencies of his days, *and* his passionate thesis went under

the skin of human transience to expose the nature of what we really are and our origins in the Beyond of the Heaven and Earth.

Part II exhibits how profound such Mencian interpretive influences have been in the history of Chinese thinking, as shown among some salient pivotal thinkers. The history of Mencian exegesis describes how the *Mencius*' interpretive influences fared for two millennia, for Mencius issues an exigent primal call to us to return to our original nature at one with the natural world. Part II describes Mencius' interpretive influences as reflected in ages of the past.

The Epilogue explicates—unfolds—what composes the interpretive influences of the *Mencius* in three characteristics of Chinese hermeneutics, namely, political praxis, hermeneutical apologetics, and personal pilgrimages.

A final point is in order. Postmodernist deconstructionism insists that our readings are *our* own readings in today's social, economic, political and cultural contexts, and that such "objective" problems as what or who the real writer was, or what the writer really said or meant, are not only impossible to see or decipher, but simply irrelevant. What the history of Chinese hermeneutics teaches us is precisely this point, that what counts is more the interpretive influences of the sages on us than *what* exactly and objectively this sage said or that sage taught. In this sense at least, the history of Chinese hermeneutics has much to offer to the current debates on textuality, contextuality and intertextual intersubjectivity. This volume zeroes in on this theme specifically in terms of "the hermeneutic history of the *Mencius*" in its historical context, the history of Mencian hermeneutics in China. Hence, our title, "Mencian Hermeneutics: A History of Interpretations in China."