

INTRODUCTION

The Pragmatic Nature of Mencius' Philosophy

Although Chinese intellectual history traditionally has been understood as a tradition of deeply pragmatic thinking, what "pragmatic thinking" means is not often appreciated. The following pages set out to claim, in essence, that Chinese thought is pragmatic in the following twofold sense.

On the one hand, as Mencius instinctively and incisively declared, all his arguments--in political debates, in philosophical reasoning--were born of the exigencies of specific situations (3B9, cf. 2B12). Therefore, Mencius' thoughts cannot be understood apart from that situational context. On the other hand, these responses to situations went beyond the situation and probed its origins, ambiance, and goals, together with the depths, the heights, and the vast beyond of what we are and how we live. Therefore, Mencius' protests against the powers that be cannot be understood apart from this homo-metaphysical background.

This is to say that Mencius' thinking, and all Chinese thought as well, are sociopolitical in tone, and humanistic-metaphysical in nature and range. The beauty of Mencius' thinking lies in the organic mutuality of all these factors. Mencius' arguments are shaped in sociopolitics, in the fabric and frame of agri-economics and literature. At the same time, all the concrete programs proposed, and all rapier-sharp criticisms of various policies, are rooted in the metaphysical soil of man and the world, human solidarity and cosmic symbiosis, human nature and the surrounding Nature. Thus, Mencius' thinking is at once perceptive, political, conceptual and cosmologically sociopolitical. Mencius' thinking represents vast concrete thinking *par excellence*.

Part One appreciates the striking features of Mencius' thought, his mode of thinking, view of life, social and political thought. In Part One, we immediately, in Chapter One, plunge into *how* Mencius thinks in "Mencius' Concrete Thinking," as distinct from theoretical argumentation in the West. This is followed by three chapters on various aspects of Mencius' thoughts: Chapter Two on the *Harmonia Mundi* in Mencius' system of thought and on a connection of the innermost to the outermost; Chapter Three on the connection of the

self to the social: *li* (利, profit) which means profit not shared versus *yi* (義, rightness) which means profit shared; and Chapter Four on the populist government of familial empathy in Mencius. All four chapters in Part One jointly explicate the unity of Mencius' "philosophy" as it strikes us today, as I see it.

The *Mencius* and Historical Hermeneutics

In Part One, we critically appreciate Mencius' grand proposal, his *Harmonia Mundi* as a homo-mundane, anthropo-ecological, and *Hsin-ch'i-hsing* (心—氣—形) unity. We also consider its social and political dimensions. Before doing this, in order to underscore the importance of such an understanding of Mencius, we first consider various interpretations shaped by the *Mencius*' proposal. We take a bird's-eye-view of the historical vicissitudes of the *Mencius* interpretations.

1. First, the *political* impact of the *Mencius*. The *Mencius* served as an arsenal for ministers against manipulating emperors. At the same time, other ministers came to manipulate Mencius' ideas to defend their favorite political programs. Such ministerial manipulation of the *Mencius* was not significant until the Northern Sung (A.D.960-1126), when numerous references to the *Mencius* were made in intellectual and political contexts, due to the rising prestige of the *Mencius* in the Northern Sung.

During the Former Han (206 B.C.- A.D.8) and the Later Han (A.D.9-23) periods, Mencius was not politically conspicuous. Although Emperor Ching's (景帝, r. 156-141 B.C.) son, the Ho-chien Hsien-wang (河間獻王), was interested in collecting books, including the *Mencius*,¹ no Han political figure used the *Mencius* for political purposes. The Later Han thinker, Wang Ch'ung (王充, A.D.27-100?), in his *Balanced Inquiries* (*Lun-heng*, 論衡), attacked Mencius' view of fate and human nature, and his argumentation for that view.²

During the Period of Disunion (A.D.220-589), no political figure mentioned the *Mencius* for political reasons. Only Emperor Yüan (r. A.D.552-554) of the Liang Dynasty (A.D.502-557) in his

¹ Pan Ku, *Ch'ien Han-shu* (SPPY edition), *chüan* 53, pp. la-b. Hereafter *HS*.

² Wang Ch'ung, *Lun-heng* (SPPY edition), *chüan* 3, pp. 12a-16a.

Chin-lou-tzu (金樓子) occasionally referred to the *Mencius* on cyclical patterns of development in history and the Five Social Relationships (*wu-lun* 五倫).³ The emperor did not read the *Mencius* in political context.

In the T'ang Dynasty (618-907), efforts were made to draw imperial attention to the *Mencius*. In 763, Minister of Education (Li-pu shih-lang, 禮部侍郎), Yang Wan (楊綰, d. A.D.777), submitted a memorial to Emperor T'ai-tsung (太宗, r. A.D.763-779), suggesting that the *Mencius* be included in the required studies of those designated "Filial and Incorrupt" (*hsiao lien*, 孝廉).⁴ Later, Han Yü (T'ui-chih, 退之, A.D.768-824) defined the orthodox line of transmission of the Confucian Way (*tao t'ung* 道統) and extolled Mencius as the sole disciple to receive the true teaching of Confucius.⁵ Then P'i Jih-shiu (皮日休, A.D.834?-883?), holder of the "Presented Scholar" (*chin-shih* 進士) degree and a renowned literatus, advised Emperor Yi-tsung (懿宗, r. A.D.860-873) to designate the *Mencius*, to replace the *Chuang Tzu* and the *Lieh Tzu*, as "official text" for the civil service examinations.⁶ However, none of these suggestions were adopted by the throne.

There is only one significant case of a T'ang reference to the *Mencius*. When Emperor T'ai-tsung made an imperial tour of modern Shan-hsi province, then stricken by drought, he asked a tax collector about the amount of tax collected. This minor officer quoted Mencius' saying, "What is the point of mentioning 'profit'?"⁷ The official used the *Mencius* to convey his opinion to the Emperor.

In contrast to the paucity of political uses of the *Mencius* before the Sung period, examples of this sort frequently occurred

³ Emperor Yüan of the Liang Dynasty, *Chin-lou Tzu* (Taipei: Shih-chieh shu-chü, n. d.), *chüan* 4:a, p. 6a, 7b, 25a, 28a-b (a and b refer to the former and the latter half the page respectively).

⁴ See Wang P'u, *T'ang Hui-yao* (Ts'ung-shu Chi-ch'eng Ch'u-pien edition), p. 1396. See also Ou-yang Hsiu, *Hsin-T'ang Shu* (SPPY edition), *chüan* 44, p. 5d. Hereafter *HTS*.

⁵ Han Yü, "Yüan Tao," in his *Chu-wen-kung Chiao Ch'ang-li Chi* (SPTK edition), *chüan* II, pp. 1a-3b.

⁶ P'i Jih-hsiu, *P'i Tzu Wen-sou* (SPTK edition), *chüan* 9, p. 111b-112a. See also Sun Kuang-hsien, *Pei-Meng Sou-yen* (Yüeh-ya-t'ang Ts'ung-shu edition, in Po-pu Ts'ung-shu Chi-ch'eng Series), *chüan* 2, p. 1a.

⁷ See Liu Hsü, *Chiu T'ang Shu* (SPPY edition), *chüan* 345, p. 4b. Hereafter *CTS*.

during Sung times. Many scholar-officials quoted the *Mencius* either to refute an imperial policy or to attack their political rivals.⁸ Wang An-shih (王安石, Chieh-fu 介甫, A.D.1021-1086), the eleventh-century reformer, claimed he admired the *Mencius* and used it to justify his political reforms. This prompted Ssu-ma Kuang (司馬光, Chün-shih 君實, A.D.1019-1086) to attack the *Mencius* as a way of undermining the ideological foundation of Wang's policies. Both parties used Mencius to justify their own political programs.

Many Sung emperors claimed to be patrons of the *Mencius*. For example, Emperor Chen-tsung (真宗, r.A.D.997-1022) was said to have collated extant commentaries of the *Mencius* and conferred a set of the *Sound and Meanings of the Mencius* (*Meng Tzu Yin Yi*, 孟子音義) on every minister.⁹ In 1129, Emperor Kao-tsung (高宗, r. A.D.1127-1162) of the Southern Sung copied a passage from the *Mencius* on a movable door-screen to show his patronage of this Classic. Ten years later (1138), he ordered Yin Ts'un (尹焞) to write a treatise on Mencius' ideas.¹⁰ In 1143, with the same emperor's approval, a stone tablet with carvings of Mencius' sayings was set up at the Imperial University and every local school.¹¹

During the period of the "conquest dynasties," Chin (A.D.1115-1234) and Yüan (1271-1368), the *Mencius* continued to receive favorable treatment from foreign rulers. In 1151, the Chin Emperor Hai-ling (r. A.D.1149-1161) reestablished the Imperial University and adopted Chao Ch'i's commentaries on the *Mencius* as an official text for the University.¹² In 1183, the Institute for

⁸ T'o-t'o et al. eds., *Sung Shih* (SPPY edition), Vol. 345, p. 4b; Vol. 395, pp. 3b-4a; Vol. 405, pp. 9b-10a; Vol. 410, pp. 2b-3a. Hereafter SS.

⁹ This work, according to Chu Hsi and other authorities, was not written by Sun Shih. See: Li Ching-te ed., *Chu Tzu Yü-lei* (Peking: Chung-hua shu-chü, 1981), 2, *chüan* 19, p. 443; Ch'ien Ta-hsin, *Shih-chia-chai Yang-hsin Lu* (SPPY edition), *chüan* 3, "Meng Tzu Cheng-yi Fei Sun Hsüan-kung Chuo," pp. 6a-b; Chi Yün, *Ssu-k'u Ch'üan-shu Tsung-mu T'i-yao*, *chüan* 35, pp. 98-99.

¹⁰ Yin Ts'un, *Yin Ho-ching Chi* (Taipei: Yi-wen Yin-shu-kuan photo-reproduction of the Po-pu Ts'ung-shu Chi-ch'eng edition), p. 2b, 17a.

¹¹ Li Hsin-ch'uan, *Chien-yen Yi-lai Hsi-nien Yao-lu* (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 1975, the Ssu-k'u Ch'üan-shu Chen-pen Pieh-chi edition), Vol. 150, pp. 12b-13a.

¹² T'o-t'o et al., *Chin Shih* (SPPY edition), Vol. 51, pp. 1b2a. Hereafter CS. Cf. Jin-sheng Tao, *The Jürchen in Twelfth-Century China: A Study of Sinicization* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), pp. 103-110.

Translation completed a Jürchen translation of the *Mencius*.¹³ Under Mongol rule, studies of Mencius were not suppressed. On the contrary, in 1268 Khubilai Khan (Emperor Shih-tsu 世祖, r. 1260-1294) ordered his ministers to transcribe the *Mencius*.¹⁴ Beginning in 1287 the *Mencius* was placed at the head of the required reading list for students of the Imperial University.¹⁵ Significantly, after 1313, Chu Hsi's Collected Commentaries on *Mencius*, the *Analects*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Great Learning*, were recognized as official texts to be used in the revived civil-service examinations.¹⁶ This practice continued until 1905, when the civil-service examinations were officially abolished.

Interestingly, Ming T'ai-tsu (太祖, r.1368-1396), founder of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), several times shifted his attitude towards the *Mencius*. Initially, he revered it when he was a minor leader of a "flock of bravos" competing for the unification of China after the Mongolian regime unraveled. Then, as Chin-hua, modern Nanking, was conquered, T'ai-tsu listened to the renowned scholar Hsü Ts'un-jen (許存仁) lecture on the essentials of Mencius, and was very much impressed with Mencian benevolent government.¹⁷ However, his favorable attitude suddenly changed after he ascended to the throne; he turned furious when he read Mencius saying, "If a prince treats his subjects as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy,"¹⁸ and proclaimed an imperial edict to remove Mencius' tablet from Confucian Temple. But a courageous minister Ch'ien T'ang (錢唐) submitted a memorial opposing the imperial decision, so T'ai-tsu permitted Mencius to stay in the temple. In 1394, T'ai-tsu appointed a member of the Imperial Academy, Liu San-wu (劉三吾, 1312-1399), to review the *Mencius* and expurgate many chapters inimical to absolutist monarchy.¹⁹ This resulted in the *Abridged Text of the Mencius* (*Meng Tzu Chieh-wen* 孟子節文, preface dated

¹³ CS, *chüan* 81, pp.3b.

¹⁴ Sung Lien, *Yüan Shih* (SPPY edition), *chüan* 6, p. 9a.

¹⁵ YS, *chüan* 81, p. 8b.

¹⁶ YS, *chüan* 81, p. 2b-3a.

¹⁷ Chang T'ing-Yü et al., *Ming Shih* (SPPY edition), *chüan* 137, p. 7b. Hereafter MS.

¹⁸ Lau, *Mencius*, p. 128.

¹⁹ MS, *chüan* 138, p. lb.

1394), which became an official text for the civil service examinations. Not until 1414/5 was the full text of the *Mencius* restored by Emperor Ch'eng-tsu (成祖, r. 1402-1424).

On the whole, however, whatever the occasion in imperial China, the *Mencius* came to be quoted by ministers as cover for counter opinions or even criticism against the throne. It was also due to similar considerations that monarchs either patronized it or censored it.

Now let us see how the *Mencius* fared in Confucian *Scholarship*. During the period of evolution of Confucianism, covering roughly one millennium from Han to Sung times, the image of the *Mencius* underwent two changes: first in the Later Han, then in the Southern Sung. Mencius attracted only a limited following among Former Han scholars. Ssu-ma Ch'ien (司馬遷, 145-86B.C.) wrote a terse biographical account of Mencius in *Records of the Historian (Shih Chi)*. Ssu-ma Ch'ien saw Mencius as expositor of the Confucian Classics such as the *Odes* and the *Documents*. Yang Hsiung (楊雄, 53 B.C.- A.D.18) claimed to admire Mencius. In the Later Han, Wang Fu (王符, A.D.90-165), Hsün Yüeh (荀悅, A.D.148-209), Ying Shao (應劭), Cheng Hsüan (鄭玄, A.D.127-200) and Chao Ch'i (趙岐, Fen-ch'ing 邠卿, A.D.?-210) took the *Mencius* to be the core of classical learning.²⁰

A turning point came with Han Yü, a major T'ang literary writer of the classical movement and a forerunner of Sung Neo-Confucianism. He revered Mencius as the legitimate successor of Confucius and took the *Mencius* as the primary philosophical treatise in history.

Perhaps the watershed came when the reform movements failed in the eleventh century. In the Southern Sung, the *Mencius* was read mostly as a philosophical treatise. Chu Hsi's (朱熹, Hui-an 晦庵, 1130-1200) *Collected Commentaries on the Mencius (Meng Tzu Chi-chu 孟子集註, completed in 1177)* culminated this new development. During Han times, the *Mencius* was taken as a footnote to *Five Classics*. Now, the *Mencius* was regarded as an

²⁰ For a brief review of the changes of scholars' images of the *Mencius* in Chinese history, cf. T'ang Chün-yi, "Lun Meng Hsüeh Chung chih Hsing-ch'i Hsin-chih Yi Li Jen chih Tao," *Hsin-ya Shu-yüan Hsüeh-shu Nien-k'an*, 14 (1972), pp. 55-87, esp. pp. 56-58.

integral part of the *Four Books* as assembled by Chu Hsi. This change of the *Mencius*' image indicates a shift of scholarly attention from the *Five Classics* to the *Four Books*.²¹

Later Han scholars, notably Chao Ch'i, read the *Mencius* from a political point of view. This tradition continued until the eleventh century. After Wang An-shih's failed reforms, scholars' attention shifted to philosophical issues in the *Mencius*. Chu Hsi's reading of the *Mencius* was a clear shift of attention from statecraft to philosophy. After Chu Hsi, a great number of interpretations of *Mencius* continued to be offered.

3. Our odyssey of the *Mencius*-hermeneutics in Chinese intellectual history requires observing three interrelated facets: (A) historicity of interpreters, (B) historical linguisticity of the text, and (C) circularity of interpretation.

A. Historicity of Interpreters

We first note two environmental factors to account for divergent historical interpretations of the *Mencius*: (a) political differences before and after the Ch'in (221-206 B.C.), and (b) the interpreters' worldviews systematically coloring their interpretations. Then, we consider why *we* can note these facts; it is because our own assumptions differ from *Mencius*' and from those of previous interpreters. Finally, we reflect on the significance of these two points.

The *Mencius* has been interpreted differently in different ages. There were at least two historical factors responsible for these divergences: (a) difference in political situation, and (b) difference in worldview.

(a) As Hsü Fu-kuan (徐復觀, 1902-1982) noted, political pluralism in *Mencius*' time enabled *Mencius* to envision the ideal of a people-centered world, a democracy-like world. The world of many later commentators was, however, centered on the emperors, the world of autocracy.²²

This fact explains why later interpretations were so politically

²¹ Cf. Uno Seiichi, "Gokyo kara Shisho e," *Toyo no Bunka to Sha-kai*, II (1952), pp. 1-14.

²² Cf. Hsü Fu-kuang, *Ju-chia Cheng-chi Ssu-hsiang yü min-chu Chih-yu Jen-ch'üan* (Taipei: Pa-shih Nien-tai Ch'u-pan She, 1979), pp. 215-242.

obsessed. The “Great One” (who does not lose one’s infant heart) was politicized to mean that the emperor keeps his people as his own children; the “Wise Man” (who enlightens others with his own enlightenment) was one who wisely governs the nation with enlightened legal and moral systems.²³

Mencius expressed his attitude to teaching in 25 characters; Chao Ch’i expanded on it into 77 characters.²⁴ Chiao Hsün (焦循, Li-t’ang 里堂, 1763-1820) was astute enough to observe that Chao Ch’i’s expansion vented Chao’s burning frustration at the discovery that men in power tended to be mere sycophants despite having been well educated.²⁵ Similarly, Chu Hsi commented on the great classics out of his political frustration.²⁶ Mencius himself also taught out of his own frustration and nostalgia for a moral-political Utopia.

(b) Divergent modes of interpretation also resulted from Mencius’ outlook on the world differing from later interpreters’. Mencius argued spontaneously and vehemently, while later scholars commented on Mencius calmly, deriving interpretations from their own systems of metaphysical outlook.

Moreover, new interpretations arose in three ways. First, the interpreter chose one specific feature as Mencius’ real intention out of spontaneous amalgams of several features, resulting in “the tunnel effect” as J. H. Hexter terms it.²⁷ Secondly, the interpreter excavated several “hidden implications” from Mencius’ argument, thus unwittingly placing it in a different context.

²³ See Chao Ch’i’s Commentaries in the *Meng Tzu* (SPTK Ts’u-pien So-pen edition), *chüan* 8, p. 65a and *chüan* 14, p. 118a.

²⁴ Chiao Hsün, *Meng Tzu Cheng-yi* (Peking: Chung-hua Shu-chü, 1978), *chüan* 29, pp. 1005-1006. Hereafter as MTCL.

²⁵ MTCL, II, *chüan* 29, pp. 1006-1007.

²⁶ Cf. Conrad M. Schirokauer, “Chu Hsi’s Political Career: A Study in Ambivalence,” in Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett eds., *Confucian Personalities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 162-188; Brian Mcknight, “Chu Hsi and His World,” in Wing-tsit Chan ed., *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 408-436.

²⁷ For a discussion of “tunnel history,” see J. H. Hexter, *Reappraisals in History* (Evanston, Ill., 1961), pp. 194-195; David H. Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1970), pp. 142-144.

A third way, usually called “appropriation,”²⁸ represents a combination of the above two ways. For instance, Chu Hsi saw in Mencius’ “knowing words” (*chih yen*, 知言) the core of Mencius’ thought (the first way), then with this one feature interpreted three others—collecting rightness, nourishing *ch’i* 氣, keeping one’s inner mind-heart. This is the first way. In this instance, as is usually the case, “knowing words” is in fact synonymous with Chu Hsi’s own favorite notion, “exhausting *li* (理, principles).”²⁹ This is the second way. Chu Hsi combined both ways to compose his particular interpretation of Mencius. We call this “appropriation.”

Situational differences or contextual divergences caused various commentators to differ in their interpretations of Mencius’ text. This is because each commentator had a particular slant peculiar to his age and his own predilections (whether situational or metaphysical), and this helped form his interpretive perspective. Such interpretations may appear to have been eclipsed either by the brightness of new interpretive illuminations or the shadows cast by one particular interpretive angle.

Thus, the imperial reality of Chao Ch’i’s time made Chao stress political implications in the originally more inclusive meaning of the Great One and the Wise Man.³⁰ Chiao Hsün could later discern Chao Ch’i’s particular frustration that made him elaborate on the importance of true education.³¹

In addition, we must beware of ourselves. We say of Chao Ch’i that he lived under the tension of two situations, Mencius’ and his own. But, the reason why we can say so now is the fact that we are living under the tension of three situations, that is, bringing our subjective situation to bear on the other two, Mencius’ and Chao’s.

When we say that Mencius’ diverse features can be later interpretively tunneled into one, we know (being much later than

²⁸ This is to privilege a notion over the rest, traditionally taken as contextual, not etymological or original interpretation of the text, risking psychologism. Nonetheless appropriation is inevitable, with twin benefits of making us aware of both the text’s historical distance and its relevance for today.

²⁹ For a discussion on this point, see Chapter 8.

³⁰ See Honda Wataru, “Chio Ki Mo-shi sho-gu ni tsuite,” *Ikeda Suetoshi Hakase Koki Kinen Toyogaku Ronshu* (Tokyo: Ikeda Suetoshi Hakase Koki Kinen Shigyokai, 1966), pp. 503-518.

³¹ Chiao Hsün, MTCL, *chüan* 29, pp. 1005-06.

those “later interpreters”) that Mencius had several features. We say that a particular historical commentator is “angled”—biased in this or that direction—because our interpretive “angle” differs from his. Yet, we do not know our own angularity any more than he did; nor did his appear until we came on the scene. By the same token, we won’t know our angularity until someone else later comes along to point it out from his interpretive angle.³²

No one can transcend his own situation; everyone is situated. We are living today amidst a situation of scientific open-minded “objectivity” and the popularity of “democracy” everywhere. As Chiao Hsün could say that Chao Ch’i’s emphasis on education was due to Chao’s situatedness in the late Han dynasty, so future commentators may say that our emphasis (or discernment) on Mencius’ situation of political pluralism is due to our being situated in an age of worldwide political pluralism. It is in this light that future chapters on our critical appreciation of Mencius must be seen.

Thus, the reason why we today can review all these hidden assumptions of past historians is because we live in a different environment from theirs. We can also point to the difference between Mencius’ historical situatedness and the later commentator’s because our historical situation *differs* from theirs. If there is a status similar to that of the ideal observer in history at all, it is due to this difference. We think we now know better, but future commentators will expound on our own peculiar perspectives, such as scientism, cosmopolitanism, and democracy.

All these differences jolt us into being critical of our own assumptions. As Gadamer tirelessly tells us,³³ there is no such thing as one indubitable, eternal, and complete “genuine intention of an author”; to possess “it” represents our own interpretation. What we can and must do is to uncover for ourselves the contexts and preconceptions (*Vorurteile*) in which our interpretations move and

³² Gadamer gives himself as an example. He admits that his reading of Greek philosophy is influenced by Heidegger’s, and that such self-reflective admission is made possible by reading some previous different interpreters of Greek philosophers. The *Vorurteile* of both his interpretation and others’ are made manifest by comparing his interpretation with those of others. See his “Reply to My Critics,” in Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift eds., *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Art to Ricour* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 273-297, esp. p. 283.

³³ *Ibid.*

find their existence.

As long as we can review critically our own hermeneutical ground, we can see how different previous historians' perspectives are from ours. This difference and its awareness are what enable objectivity to come about. It is historical relativism itself radically relativized, that is, made critically self-aware, which makes for historical objectivity. What makes historical objectivity different from historical objectivism is that the former is itself historically situated, while the latter is not.³⁴

B. Historical Linguisticity of the Text

Everything in history is historical, that is, alive and changing. We have seen that an interpretation of a historical event is itself so historically situated that the bias of one interpretation can only be discerned through the bias of another interpretation resulting from another historical situation.

Next we will see, correlatively, that the text itself is not a self-contained entity but has some historical impact on its reader. If we now know better (so we think anyway) about the text than previous interpreters did, it is because we latecomers can study a longer and more thorough hermeneutics than they could. Each text has a historical tendency to diversify itself to its readers by gesticulating to them and orienting their attention. To interpret a text is to enter into a dialogue between two "persons," the text and its reader. We call this, following Gadamer, the "linguisticity" of the text.³⁵

In a dialogue, two people remain distinct as parties in a process of sincere give-and-take, each criticizing and elaborating on what the other says. These activities result in something that goes beyond what both parties originally had in mind. This circular structure of dialogue (mutual give-and-take) helps us understand how, coming from within the text itself, meaning transforms, diversifies

³⁴ This is made possible by a sort of historical *phronesis* (practical reason), reason dipped in praxis. A rule, for instance, is not *understood* (for instance, in its recitation) until one can play that game. To understand a rule is to master it, that is, to master a technique. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (NY: Macmillan, 1965), paragraph 202.

³⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, tr. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1975), pp. 383-404.

and details itself, thus becoming prolific beyond itself among later interpreters. Then, those interpreters, armed with these diverse meanings, turn around and criticize the original text, thereby enriching what the original text indicates. Thus, a hermeneutical circle is born between the text and its interpreters.³⁶

A case in point is the long opening dialogue of Mencius with King Hui of Liang, where Mencius thrusts onto the king a sharp dichotomy between rightness and profit (*yi* 義-*li* 利). This section is itself an elaboration of Confucius' apothegm, "The Gentleman is intent on understanding (*yü*, 喻) rightness; the petty man on benefit" (4/16). This is perhaps an effect of Mencius' dialogic reading of Confucius.

Then, during the Warring State Period (403-222 B.C.), Hsün Tzu (fl. 298-238 B.C.) combined *yi* with *kung* (公), and made rightness into "public rightness", in opposition to "private benefit" (*ssu li* 私利). On this now expanded basis, Hsün Tzu developed a legal system that "uses *yi* to control *li*."³⁷ Personal ethics is now expanded to include public law.³⁸

Even later, in the Han Dynasty, many scholars argued about the distinction between public and private interest, using this distinction to oppose officials who expropriated people's "public interest."³⁹ Still later, T'ang Dynasty (618-907) scholars turned "public" around and interpreted it to mean the rulers, and obsequiously counseled their fellow subjects to strive for the emperor's interest.⁴⁰

³⁶ Such a hermeneutical circle makes some sorts of "fusions of horizons" between the text and its interpreters possible. This is why LaCapra proposes what he calls a "dialogical approach" for the study of intellectual history. See Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts," *History and Theory*, XIX:3 (1980), pp. 245-276. This is also why Maruyama Masao characterizes studying intellectual history as a task of "twofold creation" (*nizyu sozo*). See Maruyama Masao, "*Shisoshi no Kangae Kata ni Tsuite—ruikei, hanyi, taisho*," Takeda Kiyoko ed., *Shisoshi no Hoho to Taisho—Nihon to Seio* (Tokyo: Sobunsha, 1965), pp. 23-25. LaCapra has recently called this way of reading the "dialogical reading;" see his "History, Language, and Reading: Waiting for Crillon," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, no. 3 (June, 1995), pp.799-828.

³⁷ Wang Hsien-ch'ien, *Hsün-tzu Chi-chieh* (Taipei: Shih-chieh Shu-chü, 1969), *chüan* 12, p. 221.

³⁸ See my *Meng-hsüeh Ssu-hsiang-shih Lun*, Vol. 1, pp. 111-160.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp. 415-438.

⁴⁰ Examples of this kind of interpretation can best be found in the *Ti-fan*

It was not until the Southern Sung that Chu Hsi came to restore “public” to the people, on the ground that the public belongs to the heavenly *li*-principle that is inherently the possession of every human being.⁴¹ Private interest, he argued, stems from a particular similarity between a particular person and a particular thing.⁴² Such private interest, when followed, only destroys the follower. Confucius would never have imagined how much his simple saying would proliferate into such complex implications and applications. All this is due to the continuous dialogues between the original text and its interpreters.

From this dialogical standpoint, we can see that A. O. Lovejoy’s (1873-1962) analytical dichotomous methodology in the history of ideas can help us to understand organic diversifications of an idea. Lovejoy wants to distinguish the basic premises of the age in which an idea came about, the motivation from which the idea came, its metaphysical efficacy, its philosophical etymology, and its principle and other related notions. All this is a way of dividing (“analyzing”) “idea-complexes” into basic “unit-ideas” out of which no simpler idea-units can be analyzed or abstracted. Then, Lovejoy wants to see how each unit-idea historically develops and diversifies.⁴³

This method can help us locate, for instance, the “unit-ideas”

(*Paradigm of Kingship*), presumably written by Emperor T’ai-tsung (r. 626-649) and the *Ch’en-kui* (*Tracks for Ministership*) whose authorship was attributed to Empress Wu (r. 684-704).

⁴¹ Chu Hsi articulated his point on many occasions. See, for example, his comments on Yü Yun-wen’s (fl. 1163) *On Venerating Mencius* (*Tsun Meng Pien*) (*Tsung-shu Chi-ch’eng Ts’u-pien* edition), *chüan* 2, p. 24.

⁴² Chu Hsi, *Meng-tzu Chi-chu* in his *Ssu-su Chang-chu Chi-chü* (Peking: Chung-hwa Shu-chü, 1983), IIA, p. 201.

⁴³ See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 3-23; “*The Historiography of Ideas*,” *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948), pp. 1-13; “Reflections on the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, I:1 (January 1940), p. 7. For elaboration of Lovejoy’s methodology, see George Boas, *The History of Ideas: An Introduction* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1969), p. 23. For criticisms of Lovejoy, see: Frederick J. Teggart, “A Problem in the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, I:4 (October 1940), pp. 494-503. Maurice Mandelbaum, “The History of Ideas, Intellectual History, and the History of Philosophy,” *History and Theory*, Beiheft 5, 1965, pp. 36-66.3) Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory*, VIII: 1, (1969), pp. 3-66.

of rightness and interest (*yi* and *li*) in the *Mencius*, then trace their development by various accretions in Chu Hsi, Tai Chen (戴震, Tung-yüan 東原, 1723-1777), and scholars in Japan during the Tokugawa (1603-1868) period, such as Ito Jinsai (伊藤仁齋, 1627-1705), Nakai Liken (中井履軒, 1732-1817), or Korean scholars during the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), such as Chong Da-san (丁茶山, 1762-1836), and so on. This method enables us to discern the inner “cultural integrity” stressed by J. A. Mazzeo.⁴⁴ We can use Lovejoy’s analytical method to see the peculiarity of Chinese cultural treatments of *yi* and *li* as they (both ideas and treatments) develop in history, on the one hand, and see how they develop throughout the East Asia that covers three cultural regions of China, Japan, and Korea, thereby unifying them as one common Oriental culture, on the other. All this can be justly said to result from Lovejoy’s contribution.

Unfortunately, Lovejoy’s method is effective only within an overall structure of the text in dialogue with its reader. Atomism kills as it gives clarity. Lovejoy’s analytical method cannot be taken as the final overarching principle without fatally dissecting the living organic unity of a historical idea. This point bears elaboration.

In the first place, Lovejoy fails to appreciate the cyclical inter-referrals of an idea back and forth between the text and its readers; his method is one-directional. Secondly, his method cannot do justice to developmental enrichment, an idea’s process of becoming complex. For Lovejoy, understanding is attained through dissection and isolation. But, a mixture can be appreciated only as mixture; we appreciate the flavor of a cake as that of the cake, not as an accretion of its ingredients. An analysis of the cake’s ingredients only destroys its flavor.

One crucial point must be made before concluding this subsection. It is amazing how many complex inter-referrals and diverse developments of scholarly ideas through long periods of history centered on the single text *Mencius* have been left us. This complex diversification of textual implications would have been impossible were the original text seen as thin, weak and shallow. These lively and drawn-out scholarly engagements persistently, and

⁴⁴ Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, “Some Interpretations of the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXIII: 3, (July-September 1972), pp. 379-394.

powerfully, demonstrate the profound multifarious *impacts*, diversely felt among those thoughtful people, of the single text of the *Mencius*. We now move on to consider how these Mencian impacts fared in the long history of Chinese hermeneutics — in circularity.

C. The Historical Circularity of Interpretation

First, we consider the historical circularity of interpretation. Then, we discuss its significance.

We should begin by noting that circularity is fourfold, stemming from the well-known distinction between two sorts of commentators on the *Mencius*: the documentary, such as Chao Ch'i and Chiao Hsün, on the one hand, and the doctrinal such as Chu Hsi, on the other. The former approach, as indicated by the Ch'ing scholar Li Chao-lo (李兆洛, 1769-1841), was employed by scholars before the T'ang while the latter was used by Sung scholars.⁴⁵

Chao Ch'i and Chiao Hsün concentrated on minute textual scrutiny, deciphering what each word and sentence really meant at the time of writing. Aiming at the whole, they started with the parts. In contrast, Chu Hsi directly confronted the text to expound on what each sentence (and each word) means in the context of the entire *Mencius*. To clarify the parts, Chu confronted the whole. Thus, this is the first hermeneutical circle: Part and whole are related in a circular way. To understand the whole, we need to grasp the parts, while to understand the parts we must comprehend the whole.

Secondly, Chao Ch'i and Chiao Hsün also exhibited an objective historical approach, while Chu Hsi was problem-oriented, becoming contemporaneous with the *Mencius*. An objective historical approach prepares for thematic contemporaneity, while thematic inquisitiveness orients the way of historical approach. Thus, this represents the second hermeneutical circle: A historical approach prepares for contemporaneity, which in turn directs objective historicity.

Thirdly, we can say that the above circles result from the inherent circularity between past and present. Obviously, today is today because it goes beyond to include many yesterdays. But, these yesterdays also include today; for today appeals to yesterdays

⁴⁵ Li Chao-lo, *Yang-i Chai Wen-chi* (Han-yün Chai Ts'ung-shu edition), *chüan* 3, "I-ching T'ang Shu Ching-chieh Hsü", p.26.

for exposition of and authorization for today's humanistic ideals. Yesterdays become part of today, which builds on yesterdays' achievements. This is the third hermeneutical circle, the circle of mutual transcendence and inclusion between past and present. This is, in effect, what Section A above has shown.

Finally, the above circle stems from this one: When reading the *Mencius*, one reads for what it says. And, yet, later readers easily detect that the putative meaning one had read was really what one read in one's own situation, in one's situational frame, colored by one's own set of assumptions.

For example, Chao Ch'i took Mencius' "Great Man" to mean the emperor; that interpretation now appears to be a reflection of the age of totalitarianism in which he lived. When Chu Hsi took Mencius' "collecting of rightness" as an exhausting of *li*-principles; his interpretation clearly reflected Chu's own metaphysical concerns.⁴⁶ And, how do *we* find out about all these hidden (situational) assumptions? The answer to this question lies in the difference we feel between their assumptions and ours. This is the fourth and final hermeneutical circle, that exegetical "objectivity" is based on the subjectivity of the exegete, who in turn conscientiously follows such "objectivity."

Thus, in the final analysis, this fourfold circularity has a double significance: the text impacting the interpreter who in turn impacts the hermeneutical status of the text (Section B), and the past interpretations impacting the present ones which in turn revise the past (Section A). We have seen both kinds of circularity in previous sections. We must now ponder why this is the case.

By reflecting on those circles, we realize that circularity results from the fact that interpretation of a historical text is itself historical. For us historical beings, there is no privileged trans-historical standpoint by which to judge history. Still, although there is no point beyond history, the essence of history is that we are constantly going beyond the present into the future, turning the present into the past *beyond* which we stand in the now. This obvious fact renders historical hermeneutical circles into an inter-impacting spiral.

Hindsight is always valuable. Many different views from

⁴⁶ See my *Meng-hsüeh Ssu-hsiang-shih Lun*, Vol. 2 (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1997), pp. 191-252.

many different angles on (hopefully) the same thing mutually overlap and interpose, to (it is hoped) progressively and asymptotically correct, improve on, and enrich our initial view of a text, as M. Merleau-Ponty said on so many occasions.⁴⁷

Thus, historical circularity is really a spiral with an axis at its center,—the text itself, and a deepening and enriching of its understanding via the inter-impacting spiral of interpretive history.

How can one tell that the axis is the text? Theoretically, no one can. But, practically, we interpreters have both, an inherent capability to perceive and recognize an entity to be the particular entity that we have been looking for, and the ability to sense errors when we encounter the text. These two capacities can be (and are often) strengthened in a continuous dialogue and give-and-take among interpreters, both contemporary and historical. This perceptive capacity lies at the base of all our recognition, and our thinking that operates on this recognition.

This is the final and critical facet of the matter called “history.” We said above, “theoretically, no one can, but practically” we have ways of achieving a recognition, ever deeper and richer, of a text and its meaning. This “practically” is synonymous with “historically.” This is the historical impact of the spiral of interpretive dialogue. History gives us the uncertainty of the circle of dialogical interpretation. This same history also gives us an impact to correct and even enrich interpretation, from one generation to another.

⁴⁷ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, tr. Colin Smith, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. xix, 87f, 172, 158, 448f.; *The Primacy of Perception*, ed., James M. Edie (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press), pp. 19f, 24f, 193ff.; *Signs*, tr. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern University Press), pp. 103-11, 137f. This view may be a reverse substantiation of R. G. Collingwood’s celebrated notion of “re-enactment” at the core of historical understanding. See his *The Idea of History*, Revised Edition, With Lectures 1926-1927, Edited with an Introduction by Jan Van Der Dussen, (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1994), vide Index, p. 508.