

Preface

The essays collected in this volume are based on papers presented at the conference on “The *Book of Mencius* and Its Reception,”¹ sponsored by the National Taiwan University and the Fritz-Thyssen-Foundation and organized by the Fritz-Thyssen-funded research group “The *Mencius* in the Context of the Human Rights Debate”. The conference was held at the Philosophy Department of the University of Karlsruhe in June 2005. It brought together scholars from Taiwan, Japan and Europe and focussed on various aspect of the reception of the *Mencius* in China, Korea and Japan from the Song-Dynasty to the present day.

The *Mencius*, attributed to the Confucian philosopher Mengzi (Lat. Mencius, ca. 370-290 BC), the “second Sage” (*ya sheng*) of the school after its founder, is one of the most prominent of all Confucian classics. It had a great impact on the historical development of Confucianism, and it serves today as a determinant for positioning Confucianism in the modern world.

The influence of the *Mencius* has transcended China's borders. Since the 16th and 17th century, leading Korean and Japanese scholars have discussed the book from various angles. Its political implications in particular have always been an important matter of dispute. In Japan, for example, some authors have admired the Mencius for its humane thought while others have regarded it as incompatible with the indigenous tennoism and accordingly condemned it. In the West, the first Latin translation was published in the early 18th century. English and German editions appeared between 1890 and 1920, and Chinese students in the United States introduced Mencian ideas to their American acquaintances as exemplarily rational and humane ethics. Since the late 19th century, the Mencius appears in East Asian and Western discourses as a possible basis for modern human rights thinking. Today, the book is the most discussed Chinese classic in the context of the search for universally valid ethical norms and democracy.

As to the study of Mencian thought, this volume suggests above all two areas for further research. The critique of despotism, the insistence on the primacy of morals, the understanding of the human being as an *ens morale*, and the view of the people as the foundation of the state to be found in the

¹ An exception is Chun-chieh Huang's article “Contemporary Chinese Studies of Mencius in Taiwan” which is reprinted from *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, December 2004, Vol. IV, No. 1.

Mencius are of enduring importance for a world with human rights, democracy, and planetary ethics on its agenda. They deserve increasing attention, the more so since clichés about an exotic, incomprehensible „East“ still abound. Moreover, the China-centred approach to the study of the Mencius should in future broaden its focus on the East Asian world, to include Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, and beyond to a greater extent than hitherto. It is time to take seriously the global significance of a topical Chinese ethicist whom no less than Albert Schweitzer called “the most modern of all thinkers of antiquity.”

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