

The Interviews of Mencius

E Bruce Brooks 白牧之

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

WSWG Note 113 (30 Oct 1996)

Abstract. I accept D C Lau's finding (**Mencius** 205-213f, based on the correct dates for the Kings of Ngwèi 魏 and Chí 齊), that the interviews in MC 1 are in chronological order – except that the failed interview MC 1B16 must be from 0317, the first year of Lǚ Píng-gūng's reign, when Píng-gūng's movements were subject to mourning restrictions, and when Mencius was in Lǚ to see to his mother's funeral. 1B16 was probably placed at the end so that its final remark on fate could serve as a summation of Mencius's career.¹ I find that these interviews divide into two sets, only one of which is plausible as authentic records of conversations with a ruler.

Forming a Hypothesis

Data. There are 23 passages in MC 1; of them, 1B16 is not a genuine interview. Points of interest, as possibly indicating a late passage, are: (C) the ruler is assumed to know or be impressed by the classical texts, (D) Mencius shows disrespect for the ruler; and (L) the length of the passage in characters (presumably reflecting the length of the interview; long interviews are intrinsically improbable).

Passage	C	D	L	Passage	C	D	L
1A1	–	–	152	1B1	–	–	363
1A2	C	D	165	1B2	C	D	138
1A3	–	[D]	359	1B3	C	–	267
1A4	C	D	125	1B4	C	–	353
1A5	–	–	173	1B5	C	–	305
1A6	–	–	155	1B6	–	D	74
1A7	C	–	1313	1B7	–	–	195
				1B8	–	D	61
				1B9	–	–	116
				1B10	–	–	137
				1B11	C	D	234
				1B12	–	–	141
				1B13	–	–	60
				1B14	–	–	89
				1B15	–	–	165
				1B16	–	–	229
Character Totals:			2442				2927

¹Its correct chronological position must have been before 1B10, which is concerned with the 0315 Chí interference in Yēn; it may also have preceded what is now the first of the other Chí pieces, 1B1. For the pattern produced by putting 1B1 at the end, see below.

Length. Omitting the noninterview 1B16, so as to concentrate on the conventions of an actual interview, the distribution of the 22 interviews by size is roughly:



The long piece, 1A7, is far out of proportion to the rest; it might have occupied about 15 minutes of real time. The rest cluster around a peak at 2 minutes (150 characters), and have a range of about 1 to 5 minutes (60 to 363 characters). No shorter piece can be excluded as intrinsically unlikely, but 1A7 invites suspicion as unduly long.

MC 1A7. That suspicion is increased if we notice that the conclusion of 1A7 refers to 1A3 (Mencius says 盖反其本矣 “Why not go back to the basics,” followed by a repeat of 1A3:4, the next to last paragraph in 1A3). In effect, 1A7 reiterates the 1A3 recommendation (as though the King of Chí might recall it, though it was previously presented to the King of Lyáng). Both passages end by saying that no one who practiced such a policy ever failed to become a True King (然而不王者，未之有也). In 1A3:4, this echoes and completes the preceding paragraph, 1A3:3 (王道之始也 “This is the beginning of the Royal Way”).

MC 1A3. It then seems that 1A7 follows and develops 1A3. But the point of departure for 1A7, namely 1A3:4, is followed in the present text by a final paragraph, 1A3:5, which suddenly denounces the King for his disregard of the people’s welfare: 狗彘食人食而不知檢 “Your dogs and swine are eating the food of men, but you do not know enough to institute rationing.” This outrageous rebuke is unimaginable in a real court audience. It is probably a later addition to 1A3, added after 1A7 already existed. The sequence would then be 1A3:1-4, 1A7 (ending with a repeat of 1A3:4), and later, 1A3:5. The beginnings of those pieces might be thought to show a similar contrast: in 1A3, Mencius is responsive to the King’s question, whereas in 1A7 he *refuses* the King’s question (about the ancient hegemony) and substitutes his own, a less plausible beginning, though the rest of the interview is reasonably cordial in tone. The sudden denunciation of 1A3:5 casts all thought of courtly propriety to the winds.²

MC 1A4. Similar in tone to the implausible 1A3:5 is the whole of 1A4, which accuses the indulgent King of “leading beasts to devour men” 此率獸而食人也. The charge is especially pointed because the verb “leading 率” is used in the classical sense of the leader of the chariot host; we are invited to envision the King at the head of an army of wild animals, bearing down on helpless humans and devouring them. It is even stronger than 1A3:5. It most probably came later than 1A3:5, and was written at a time when the angry later Mencians were getting into their rhetorical stride.

I am here suggesting that there are indications of inauthenticity in the MC 1 interviews, and that a history of that text can be retrieved by following out their implications. I next consider those indications as such. The first point of interest will naturally be to establish which interviews most likely reflect the historical Mencius.

²Brooks *Nature* 275 n9 suggested that 1A3:4 and 1A5:4-6 may be later additions; I here leave that as a possibility, but do not feel it necessary to include it in the present argument.

Marks of Inauthenticity. At the end of 1A4, Mencius quotes Confucius, which would have little point unless the King accepted Confucius as an authority, and was prepared to be admonished by the citation. This is unlikely. So also with the classical texts: a ruler might know his own lore tradition (the King of Chí in 1A7 has heard of Chí Hwán-gūng, if only vaguely), but less plausibly the specific tradition embodied in the Shī and Shū. The King of Lyáng, a warrior of the old school, is perhaps especially unlikely to be versed in the Confucian writings.³ We may regard such assumptions of Confucian learning or receptivity in the sovereign as late elements. Passages with these elements are 1A2 (Mencius quotes the Shī and Shū), 1A4 (Mencius quotes Confucius), 1A7 (the King quotes the Shī), 1B2 (the King queries an ancient record), 1B3 (Mencius quotes the Shī and Shū), 1B4 (Mencius repeats an anecdote which quotes “a saying of Syà”), 1B5 (Mencius quotes the Shī), and 1B11 (Mencius quotes the Shū); a total of eight passages.

Implausibly accusatory or threatening in tone, besides the already discussed 1A3:5 and 1A4, are 1B2 (the ruler’s entrapment of the people), 1B6 (the shocking principle that a bad ruler may be removed), 1B8 (the people’s right to assassinate a bad ruler), and 1B11 (denunciation of Chí atrocities in occupied Yēn). Of these six passages, three have already appeared in the previous list, for a cumulative total of eleven.

Also suspicious is the contradiction between 1B7, where delegation to the talented is a last resort, and 1B9, where it is a basic principle. Having no insider support in Chí, and probably agreeing with the meritocratic position of the contemporary Analects, Mencius probably favored the latter, hence 1B9 is likely to be authentic. 1B7 advises hiring an able man, over the heads of the established, only if all classes unanimously endorse him. This goes beyond LY 13:24 (cited by Legge),⁴ to limit the appointment of the worthy to extreme and publicly endorsed instances. Adding this to the list of suspect passages gives 1A2, 1A3:5, 1A4, 1A7, 1B2-8, and 1B11, a total of twelve. It leaves as probably genuine 1A1, 1A3:1-4, 1A5-6, 1B1, 1B9-10, and 1B12-16, the last being an abortive rather than a real interview, but not otherwise suspect.

Arguments in Support of the Hypothesis

Distribution. Adjusting 1A3 (to 306 characters), limiting 1B1 to the interview proper (321 characters), and bracketing the noninterview 1B16, we now have:

	1B12 1A1 1A5				
1B13 1B14	1B9	1B10 1A6 1B15	[1B16]	1A3 1B1	
100		200		300	400

Though not symmetrical, this is a more natural picture of variation around an ideal value. The mean (165) and standard deviation (77) can realistically be calculated.

³The Dzwǒ Jwàn, whose completion date of c0312 is within the span of Mencius’s career (0320-c0310), never attributes classical learning to any of its rulers; all exchanges of Shī quotations are between members of the serving elite. In MC 1B1, the King of Chí describes himself as bored by classical music, and liking only the popular airs of the day.

⁴The principle of LY 13:24 is quite different: the good people should all like some candidate for office, and the bad people should all hate him (compare LY 4:3/4).

Form. Also more natural, because presumptively intentional, is the pattern made by the rulers Mencius is addressing in the sayings identified above as genuine:

1A1	Lyáng Hwèi-wáng	1B1	Chí Sywān-wáng	1B13	Týng Wún-gūng
1A3	Lyáng Hwèi-wáng	1B9	Chí Sywān-wáng	1B14	Týng Wún-gūng
1A5	Lyáng Hwèi-wáng	1B10	Chí Sywān-wáng	1B15	Týng Wún-gūng
1A6	Lyáng Syāng-wáng	1B12	Dzōu Mù-gūng	1B16	[Lǚ Píng-gūng]

The form is three units, each consisting of a triplet (three addresses to a patron ruler) followed by an addendum (an interview, or abortive interview, with a nonpatron ruler). It is hard to believe that this pattern was not intentional. If it was, the intention was probably that of the original compiler. That pattern was then gradually obscured by the later addition of angrier and more specifically “Confucian” material.

Consecutivity. The elimination of 1A2 and 1A4 as later addenda brings into close conjunction the three Lyáng Hwèi-wáng interviews, 1A1, 1A3, and 1A5. These are presented as taking place on three different occasions, but as a sequence they also give a consecutive exposition of a coherent philosophy of government: (1) the principle of benevolence, or benefit to others, as the relevant type of “benefit” for the state; (2) the need for proactive rather than remedial benevolence; better than *relieving* disasters is not *causing* disasters in the first place; and (3) this policy will strengthen the state more than the more overtly military policies of its rivals. We may imagine the King being interested on the first day, raising an objection on the second day and having it explained, and stating a wish for vengeance on the third day and being assured that the way to redeem previous defeats by other rulers is by a benevolent policy toward one’s own people. In these passages, Mencius is able to use the opportunity provided by the King’s opening question to expound his own theory in a reasonably consecutive way. The intrusion of the angrier pieces 1A2 and 1A4 spoils this consecutivity.

Linguistic Test. It is asking much to find language differences between Mencius and his imitators, but wù 勿 is always a contraction of wú 毋 “do not” plus a preposed object jī 之 “it” in the passages suggested above as genuine (1A5, 1B10, 1B15, 2A2), whereas 勿 as a simple negative occurs in passages (1A3:5, 1A7, 1B5, 2B11) which I have here suggested are from a later hand.

Conclusion. Formally and linguistically, the set of interviews which includes 1A1 are confirmed as probably early. They alone should be relied on for an idea of the historical Mencius in his public mode. The rest may be relied on for *later* history.

Postscript

E Bruce Brooks (WSWG Query 18, 24 Oct 1993)

Transcriptional Accuracy. In 1A6, uniquely in MC 1, Mencius emerges from an audience and recounts it to someone else (出語人曰). 1A6 *is* that account, with Mencius speaking of himself in the first person (eg, 吾對曰 “I replied”); he also recounts his private feelings *about* the King. These features are plausibly explained if at the time of the interview (0319), Syāng-wáng was still in mourning for his father Hwèi-wáng, so that although Mencius was able to see the King, he could not bring his entourage with him, including his amanuensis. The only way to get a record of the occasion was thus to recount the interview to the amanuensis directly afterward.

The scenario for the preservation of these transcripts is simple: they were recorded by a scribe in the Mencius group, which thus had custody of them from the beginning.

The Physical Manuscript. It will be seen from the table above that the received MC 1 contains a total of 5,369 characters, under one title (梁惠王) but divided into two physical units, these being as near equal in size as the long 1A7 will permit. If the two units of MC 1 were original structures, we would expect the first to be named from its incipit (as 梁惠王) and the second also to be named from its incipit (as 莊暴 Jwāng Bàu, from the first person named).

The inference is that the division into two is *not* original, and that the chapter was originally a single roll of bamboo, named for its incipit, and that as the additions here posited were made, the text passed the point of stability for single rolls, and so was allowed to expand into two rolls, but still under the original single-roll title. We can explore this possibility by considering the sizes of all Mencius chapters, which are in the same double-chapter format, with one title covering both parts:

MC 1A 2442	MC 1B 2927	MC 1 Total 5369
MC 2A 2688	MC 2B 2452	MC 2 Total 5140
MC 3A 2497	MC 3B 2550	MC 3 Total 5047
MC 4A 2404	MC 4B 2354	MC 4 Total 4758
MC 5A 2676	MC 5B 2451	MC 5 Total 5127
MC 6A 2640	MC 6B 2616	MC 6 Total 5256
MC 7A 2419	MC 7B 2277	MC 7 Total 4696

The uniformity of chapter size is remarkable. The largest half chapter in the Mencius is 1B, with 2927 characters. As noted above, that size may be due to the need to keep 1A7 intact (putting it in MC 1A would lead to an even greater disparity between 1A and 1B). No other half chapter exceeds 2688 characters, and we may take 2700 as a normal upper limit for a roll in this text. The original Mencius interviews as here conjectured (total, 2045 characters) would fit on one such roll. Only the later added interviews forced MC 1 onto a second roll, under the earlier established incipit title.⁵

Private Interview. Also possibly original is MC 2A2 (1097 characters), which includes some very personal information (Mencius's breath control technique) and a notably awkward question (Mencius's attitude toward the meditation adept Yén Hwét, who was then in disgrace with the Analects school); this Mencius refuses to answer (曰，姑舍是 "Let's drop this"). MC 2A2 looks like a private conversation, preserved as a counterpart to the formal interviews. It would not have fitted on the "interviews" roll, and would have needed one of its own. Those two rolls were probably the entire original written heritage of the Mencians, and the core of our present Mencius text.

Works Cited

- E Bruce Brooks and A Taeko Brooks. *The Nature and Historical Context of the Mencius*; in Alan K L Chan (ed), *Mencius*, Hawaii (2001) 242-281
 D C Lau. *Mencius*. Penguin 1970

⁵We may be reminded of the Dàu/D'v Jīng, at roughly 5,000 characters, but usually thought of as divided into "Dàu" and "D'v" halves of approximately equal size.