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### Facing the Ruler, Facing the Village: On the Roads to Complicity Following Mengzi and Benda

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**Volume 21 Issue 3 (June 2019) Article 3****Zvi Ben-Dor Benite,****"Facing the Ruler, Facing the Village: On the Roads to Complicity Following Mengzi and Benda"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss3/3>>Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.3 (2019)**Special Issue **On Complicity and Dissent. Ed. Nitzan Lebovic**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss3/>>

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Facing the Ruler, Facing the Village," Zvi Ben-Dor Benite seeks to broaden the boundaries of the discussion about complicity by taking it away from late 20th-century and contemporary debates about it. At the same time, he wishes to highlight the many faces that the problem of complicity could have in different historical moments. Following Czesław Miłosz, this article understands that there are many roads to complicity that have been articulated in different ways across time and space. This article is, therefore, an integrated meditation on complicity bringing together two radically distant approaches to the question. Reading the ancient Chinese thinker Mengzi, this article highlights two key situations leading to what we should call "complicity." The first is concerned with the thorny issue of the intellectual at the court "facing the ruler." The second place the intellectual within the people, "the village" in Mengzi's words. Mengzi identifies both of these situations as highly problematic and potentially leading to the deviation from past moral principles to which one must adhere. With this insight, this article turns to Julien Benda's famous, notorious, portrayal of the "treason of the intellectuals," and discusses it along the parameters articulated by Mengzi.

## Zvi Ben-Dor BENITE

### Facing the Ruler, Facing the Village: On the Roads to Complicity Following Mengzi and Benda

#### I. How Long is the Road to Complicity?

The opening lines of the book of *Mengzi*, a collection of didactic conversations about ethics, are in fact a strange dialogue about distance.<sup>1</sup> They concern the distance that the ancient Chinese thinker Mengzi (Mencius) traveled to see a king: "Mencius appeared in audience before King Hui of Liang. The King said, "Aged Sir, you have not regarded a thousand li [600 kilometers] as too great a distance to travel here – surely it must be that you have come to profit my state!" Mencius replied, "Your Majesty, why must you speak of profit? Indeed, there is nothing but humanity and right." (18)

And so, right from the start, the book of *Mengzi* articulates one of the most poignant questions relating to the problem of complicity—is it the intellectual's duty to work for, as King Hui puts it, "the profit of the state"? Furthermore, under what circumstances should the intellectual even engage the state. Let us see: Mengzi, the fourth century BCE sage, is not pleased with the question and rudely rejects the king's compliments. His response seems to be concerned with the issue of profit versus right and humanity, but something else is going on. The sage educates the king about their relationship: the sage would come, from a long distance if need be, to see the king and sit in audience before him. But he would discuss matters over which the sage has the authority, moral authority to be sure. Disrespectfully, Mengzi tells King Hui of Liang (r. 370 BC–319 BCE) that it is beneath him to discuss topics such as "profit." He, the moralist and possessor of virtue, comes to talk about "humanity" and "what is right"—the quintessential duties of every intellectual. And so he does. Immediately after his decisive retort, Mengzi lectures the king about the dangers of placing what is right "to the rear, and profit to the fore." He concludes, "[M]ay Your Majesty simply speak of humanity and right. Why must you speak of profit?" (Eno, "Mencius" 18).

In throwing "humanity" and "what is right" against "profit for the state," Mengzi reminds the reader of a principle with which many intellectuals—real and self-styled—would agree: any encounter between intellectuals and rulers involves a certain clash between moral truth (here coded as "humanity" and "what is right"), and power. In fact, it is from this clash that the intellectual is born. The transposers of *Mengzi*—the anonymous people that collected and edited the book—would also like us to remember that speaking truth to power sometimes entails facing the ruler. (In fact, how else can one speak truth to power without facing the ruler?). This situation is quite crucial. The conversation that immediately follows, the second encounter between Mengzi and the king, shows that the ruler learned the lesson from the first scene. Now, instead of making statements about distance and profit, he asks questions: "Mencius appeared in audience before King Hui of Liang. The King was standing by a pond in his park land, gazing at the deer and wild geese around it. 'Do worthy men also delight in things such as this?' he asked" (18).

Here we see a dramatic change in the behavior of the king, and the editors of *Mengzi* want us to know precisely where it is located. By starting with the setting of the scene, they make sure we understand that the situation in the second conversation is similar to the first one, albeit in a less formal location, the king's park. In both cases, Mengzi comes to *appear* before the king, as if to make clear that there is no question who has the power here: the ruler. However, everything else is very different. In the first conversation, the king makes a welcoming statement and Mengzi harshly interrupts him and educates him. In the second conversation, Mengzi again appears before the ruler, but now the king begins with a question, not a statement appealing to the wisdom of the sage. The topic now is aesthetics, not profit. The king even addresses the sage differently: not as "aged sir" (*sou*), but as "worthy man" (*xianzhe*). Here we come to the first realization relating to the topic of complicity and dissent. Mengzi and the editors of the book have a clear agenda: the relationship between the ruler and the sage is, first of all, a matter of *positioning*.

Mengzi, or the editors of the book of *Mengzi*, is interested in the relationship between political power and the intellectual as much as he is concerned with ethical questions. This is evident, for instance, when we think about the phrase "Mengzi appeared in audience before King Hui of Liang." The book of *Mengzi* is known for its at-length discussions of a wide range of ethical topics and moral reflections

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<sup>1</sup> Mengzi is also known by his Latinized name *Mencius* (which is why I use the name interchangeably). His birth and death are (Mencius, 372–289 BCE or 385–303 or 302 BCE). In this essay I am using *MENCIUS, An Online Teaching Translation* by Robert Eno. This excellent translation, with plenty of explanations, glossaries, and maps. When needed, I refer to some other translations as well. For a short biography of the book of *Mengzi* see Lau.

(Ivanhoe), but it also includes some conversations in the edited material—such as the ones above—that touch on the question of the relationship between the sage and the ruler.<sup>2</sup> These bits of conversation, scattered in different places throughout the book, are a distinct layer of the book that, to my mind, touches on the question with which this volume is concerned. Mengzi was one of the most self-conscious sages of his time, and his book contains scattered conversations that express grave concern for what one might call the condition of the intellectual, just as we do. Let us employ a bit of *Talmudic* argumentation here and ask: why bother mentioning who comes to see whom? Couldn't we just assume, since we have the dialogue in front of us, that Mengzi went to see the king, or that they met? The editors of *Mengzi*, I would argue, open with this redundancy because they want us to think about this issue. They place the didactic, ethical lesson, the core of the conversation, within a setting that clearly shows who has the power. They do so by reminding us that the (physical) positioning in each scene is a crucial element in the dialogue between the intellectual and power. At the same time, it is as if they want to impress upon us that when it comes to rulers and intellectuals, such meetings and conversations are not an easy, nor natural, occurrence.<sup>3</sup> Again, we are told that Mengzi went to appear before the king. The king's statement makes a connection between the distance the sage traveled to come to his court and the lessons he was going to teach. The sage chastises the ruler for making such a false connection. And so, political power and moral authority contend in this scene, expressing the tacit but very real presence of asymmetric sets of relations between power and ethical thought. The transposer of *Mengzi* tells us, I would say, that one should think about complicity and dissent within these settings.

Why bring the heavy issue of complicity—of intellectuals—into this simple story of who goes to see whom? Conversely, why tie a tale about an intellectual going to court to issues of complicity and dissent? The answer, it seems, is obvious: intellectuals, from the moment they emerge as such, are always exposed to the danger of having to *comply* with power and stray away from the principles and values they were espousing or promulgating. Any encounter with power is fraught with the attendant dangers of complicity. Indeed, sometimes it seems that the concept of the intellectual itself hatched out to the world accompanied by this attendant danger. Above all other things, what marks intellectuals as such is their acute consciousness of the possibility of, as Noam Chomsky once put it, losing their [moral] strength when they espouse power. Intellectuals, Chomsky reminds us, have two paths to choose when they realize they have to be responsible for the moral values they uphold:

One choice is to follow the path of integrity, wherever it may lead. Another is to put such concerns aside, passively adopting the conventions instituted by structures of authority. The task in the latter case, then, is to carry out faithfully the instructions of those who hold the reins of power, to be loyal and faithful servants, not after reflective judgment but by reflexive conformism. That is a fine way to evade the moral and intellectual difficulties of challenge and to escape what can be painful consequences of seeking to bend the moral arc of the universe towards justice. (Chomsky 10)

Chomsky, in his typical dry tone, is talking about the *many* ways in which intellectuals have "betrayed"—to use the passionate *single* term introduced by Julien Benda—their vocation (Benda). But how does one become "complicit"? "How does one "betray" their calling? Benda's lengthy diatribe, "one of the fussiest pleas on behalf of the necessary independence of intellectuals," as Jean-François Revel once described it, hardly deals directly with the question of complicity, and therefore also of dissent, of intellectuals when it comes to espousing power (Kimball 14). But the possibility of "intellectual betrayal" it presented had become code for an array of intellectual modes of behavior and choices concerning their responsibility towards their vocation. Maybe the tone of the argument is more commanding than its content. Framing things in terms of "treason," and therefore of "loyalty," is undoubtedly a very powerful way to discuss what intellectuals do or are supposed to do (Benda). This is certainly the case regarding modern European intellectuals. Indeed, since its publication in 1927, and particularly since its re-discovery in the late 1940s, Benda's *La Trahison des Clercs* and its key term "betrayal," or "treason," come up a lot in historical evaluations of the role of intellectuals in times of crisis.<sup>4</sup>

In his *Zniewolony umysł, The Captive Mind* (1953), the great Polish poet Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004) raised the problem of and offered a nuanced approach to the question of becoming complicit. Now a

<sup>2</sup> The common Chinese term in this context is *junzi* (Eno, "Mencius" 164).

<sup>3</sup> In thinking about the book of *Mengzi* this way, I am inspired by the work of David Weiss Halivni on the formation of Talmud and particularly about the distinction he makes between onymous voices in the text and anonymous ones. Halivni paid attention to a category of voices made by what he called the "transposers," people that "transferred material from one passage to another" and were not part of original dialogues (Halivni 190).

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas Docherty's discussion of Benda in his lucid introduction to the contemporary incarnation of the problem in the post WWII Euro-American world in his recent book (Docherty).

"right wing" cold war classic, *The Captive Mind* artfully discusses the many ways through what Miłosz called the "enslavement through consciousness" occurs. Narrating the ways in which Polish and other Eastern European intellectuals found themselves collaborating with the Stalinist regimes of the Soviet bloc that was then only few years old, the book is one of the earliest attempts to grapple with the challenges that the rise of Stalinism in post WWII Europe posed to intellectuals in the East, and also in the West. What is crucial for us here is Miłosz's insistence on both the universality of the problem of complicity and the fact that there are numerous ways of becoming complicit. Shortly after leaving Poland and arriving in Paris, Miłosz wrote the following preface to the book:

The decision to refuse all complicity with the tyranny of the East—is this enough to satisfy one's conscience? I do not think so. I have won my freedom; but let me not forget that I stand in daily risk of losing it once more. For in the West also one experiences the pressure to conform—to conform, that is, with a system which is the opposite of the one I have escaped from. The difference is that in the West one may resist such pressure without being held guilty of a mortal sin (x-xi).

Miłosz's words about the "pressure to conform" that he experiences in the West refer to his encounter with the French Left of the time—a certain crowd he now had to face. But if we remove the text from its immediate context we can, I argue, see a message that goes beyond the Europe of the 1950s. Aside from the "clear" case of "the tyranny of the East"—Stalinism—there are many forms of "pressures to conform" and many ways to engage and react to this pressure. This condition of the intellectual, therefore, is not unique to those under Stalinism. This was the main message of *The Captive Mind*. In the main parts of the book, Miłosz, who himself served the Polish Communist government before defecting, offers four delicate portrayals of different types of intellectuals and their roads to complicity with the Polish regime. Miłosz draws on the lives and stories of real intellectuals he knew, but he gave his protagonists generic names—alpha, beta, gamma, delta—to send the message that the roads taken by these intellectuals could be taken by others as well. Declaring that "never before has there been such enslavement through consciousness as in the twentieth century," Miłosz indeed treated this condition of "captive minds" as unprecedented (183). But he was careful enough to invoke the past. In the first chapter, drawing on the 1930 dystopia of Stanisław Witkiewicz (1885-1939), he describes Polish intellectuals under a modern-day Mongol conquest regime. These intellectuals lost their minds after taking Murti-Bing pills. Murti-Bing was a Mongol philosopher that produced an organic means of transporting a "philosophy of life." Thus, a "man who swallowed Murti-Bing pills became impervious to any metaphysical concerns. The excesses into which art falls when people vainly seek in form the wherewithal to appease their spiritual hunger were but outmoded stupidities for him. He no longer considered the approach of the Sino-Mongolian army as a tragedy for his own civilization" (Miłosz 4). In the second chapter, drawing on a study of the religions of Asia by Joseph Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), Miłosz describes the phenomenon of the *kitman* (*kitman*), a person concealing their opposition to the dominant orthodoxy. Writing on nineteenth century Iran, Gobineau was in fact describing the old Shi'i practice of *Taqiyyah* (lit. "prudence")—the practice of hiding or denying one's beliefs to avoid persecution—and dedicated a major portion of his book to it, focusing on the personality of the *kitman* (Gobineau). In *The Captive Mind*, Miłosz turns the Shi'i practice into three different types of modern day kitmans—the "national," the "revolutionary purist," and the "aesthetic"—all intellectuals under Stalinism who adopted different ways to hide their own beliefs and escape pressure (51-78).

Miłosz's literary travels from modern Poland to medieval Mongolia and early modern Iran make it possible for me to discuss ancient China in this context. Mengzi and his anonymous editors tell us that the problem of the intellectual and power is not new and not unique to modern twentieth century European and American intellectuals. Ancient Chinese intellectuals were concerned with it too, and Mengzi offers us one of the earliest global, conscious discussions about this it. As we shall see, he also offers us another "fussy" diatribe about the behavior of intellectuals. In this regard, Mengzi and Benda both share a similar anxiety—the fear that the intellectuals of their time betray their moral integrity—and both speak about this possibility in very harsh words. This essay is thus a reflection on some of the conditions within which aspects of the broad question of complicity are debated, discussed, and brought into sharper relief in ancient China through Mengzi's treatment of the problem. By invoking Benda's modern, and very romantic, concept of treason I am placing different instances, distant from each other in location and time, on the same page. This raises questions about historical/geographical/social continuities that may or may not make such comparisons possible. The question I ask Mengzi is applicable elsewhere: where does he locate the road to complicity—that is, the road away from the moral position one is upholding? As we shall see, Mengzi is concerned with two modes of interaction

between intellectuals and power. First, he examines the issue of interacting with rulers. Second, and much trickier, is the murky realm of the intellectual vis-à-vis the people.

## II. Facing the Ruler

Back to the *Mengzi*, let us review the main elements in the first scene we read above. First, we learn that Mengzi comes to see the king, then we hear the king speak, and finally, we get the sage's rude and decisive response. The topics of the conversation proceed in an order that also sends a message. The dialogue begins with the issues of distance and physical space, continues to mention "profit," and only then invokes the main topics of the book itself—"humanity" and "what is right." For Mengzi, power relations between the ruler and the sage must be (almost) always clear. He would cover the distance and appear before rulers. But when it comes to moral authority, there could be no mistake either—the sage is superior. He has obvious ideas about this issue. The ideal of such relationships in Mengzi's view is also very clear: "[I]f it concerns his having much learning, then even the Son of Heaven does not summon his teacher, much less a common lord," he declares (Eno, "Mencius" 104).

But this is, of course, an ideal situation, and even Mengzi himself, as we have seen, appears before rulers. It is clear that Mengzi and many others in his time were concerned with this question of going to courts and conversing with a ruler. At one point, Mengzi even seems to be apologizing for the behavior of his intellectual hero, Kongzi (Confucius, who is described in another text as having once hurried, too eagerly, to appear in court): Wan Zhang said, "'For Confucius, 'When summoned by an order from his ruler, he set off without waiting for the horses to be yoked to the carriage.' Was Confucius wrong?' 'Confucius occupied a court position with official duties. He was summoned according to his office'" (Eno, "Mencius" 119). In another instance, we see Mengzi playing "hard to get" with another ruler that wishes to see him and almost deliberately insulting him:

Mencius was about to go to the King's court when an envoy arrived to convey this message from the King: "I was planning to pay you a visit, but I am suffering from a chill and cannot risk being out in the air. However, I will hold court this morning, and I wonder whether I will be able to see you there?" Mencius replied, "Unfortunately, I am ill and unable to go to court." The following day, Mencius went to pay the Dongguo family a condolence call. (Eno, "Mencius" 53)

Mengzi's issues with going to court are further explored in the following discussion between he and his disciple Wan Zhang who asks, "When a commoner is summoned to perform corvée labor [service] he goes off to do it. Why, then, when a ruler wishes to meet with a man [a sage, z.b.] and summons him, would he refuse?" (Eno, "Mencius" 118).

In other words, why the big fuss about going to court? Mengzi addresses this question by invoking Zengzi (505-435 BCE), one of Confucius's greatest disciples:

Zengzi said, 'The rulers of Jin and Chu have wealth unequalled, but they may have it; I'll take my humanity. They may have their exalted rank; I'll take my righteousness. In what way am I their inferior?' Would Zengzi have said such a thing if it were not correct: is it not, then, a valid *dao*?

[Mengzi responded] There are three things that the world exalts: rank, age, and virtue. At court, nothing is more important than rank, in one's village it is age that is foremost, but for nurturing an era and sustaining the people, nothing surpasses virtue. How would it be right that the King, because he possesses one of these three, treats with condescension someone who possesses the other two? (Eno "Mencius" 54)

Here we can see the tension between two competing hierarchies, power vs morality/sageliness, in very clear terms. Indeed, the question of the position of the intellectual—the thinker, the philosopher, the "gentleman," (the *junzi*, a person of moral excellence)<sup>5</sup>—vis-a-vis the court is crucial. Behind it stands a simple premise—an inquiry into the question of complicity and dissent must first begin with examining the place of the intellectual in relation to power. Following Mengzi's rhetorical style, we can ask: without placing the intellectual within a clear context, how can one even begin to discuss the question of their complicity or dissent? For Mengzi, the intellectuals had only one way to serve their kings: "[T]he way a *junzi* [sage] serves a ruler is by drawing him towards the *Dao* and setting his mind upon humanity and nothing else" (Eno, "Mencius" 8). This is, without a doubt, a huge task and a great responsibility. But it

<sup>5</sup> In the Chinese sections of this essay I am using some terms representing the term "intellectual." In putting together this untidy list, I am lumping together categories that to trained eyes might speak for gradations of moral excellence. For this essay, however, one should emphasize that all fall under what we might call intellectuals (Angle 13-30; Moyn and Sartori 3-32).

entails, as I hope we can already see, uncompromising insistence on the moral superiority of the sage vis-a-vis its ruler. Mengzi is quite blatant when he refers to his moral superiority vis-a-vis people with power:

Mencius said, "When one counsels a powerful man one must view him as very small and ignore his grandeur. Their great halls ten yards high, columns and capitals several feet thick: my ambitions have nothing to do with these. Dishes of food lying before them by the yard, attendant concubines by the hundreds: my ambitions have nothing to do with these. Wildly carousing and drinking down wine, then driving full gallop, leading the hunt with a thousand chariots trailing behind: my ambitions have nothing to do with these. Such men do nothing I would want anything to do with; I do nothing that is not by the ancient ordinances. Why should I be in awe of such men?"<sup>6</sup>

Explicit insistence on moral superiority is closely connected to matters of complicity. It is crucial to note, however, that Mengzi insists on establishing this uncompromisingly superior position of the sage vis-a-vis the ruler before he even begins to educate him about the *Dao*. The *Dao* (way) in this case is what Mengzi, and the Confucian intellectual tradition, calls the "Dao of Yao and Shun"—the ethical system and virtue ethics derived from the great deeds of the legendary ancient Chinese rulers Yao and Shun. These rulers are supposed to have had the perfect virtue (*de*) and therefore should serve as models for learning and emulation (Van Norden 67-70). The contents and nature of the *Dao* of Yao and Shun (and several other ancient virtuous figures) are less relevant than the way in which intellectuals belonging to its lineage positioned themselves and others vis-a-vis its tradition. The same goes for questions about how such intellectuals identified the moments when their tradition was betrayed, neglected, or deviated from. For Mengzi, the only circumstance in which such moments can take place is when the sage faces the ruler and has to speak to him. This always happens in the court.

The matter of speaking "truth to power"<sup>7</sup> in the courts of rulers was always an issue of great import in China. Ancient texts, originating from as early the eighth century BCE (the *Chunqiu*, or Spring and Autumn period) and even before, include speeches of courtiers—ministers, noblemen, officials of all sorts—in which the speaker "remonstrates" with the ruler (Olberding). The historicity of these speeches is still a matter of debate, and it is clear that they have been edited over the years. But there is no question that they have a long legacy, at least as a literary genre (Schaberg "Remonstrance"). Within this genre, a great deal of emphasis was placed on the performative side of such moments in which an official stood up and told the ruler that he was wrong (Schaberg "Playing"). In later periods, when the ruler, the Chinese emperor, had an enormous amount of power in comparison to monarchs such as the ancient King Hui of Liang, moments of dissent were rare, but when they occurred they ultimately became quite well known. For instance: In 1402, the Ming Dynasty prince Zhu Di (b. 1360) killed his nephew, Emperor Jianwen (b. 1377, r. 1398-1402) and installed himself on the throne in his stead. On the same day, the sitting self-appointed emperor, Prince Zhu Di, summoned the distinguished Confucian scholar Fang Xiaoru (1357-1402) and the high ranking official Lian Zining (d. 1402) to serve him at the court. Having such men at the court would indicate approval of his violent actions. The two refused. Trying to persuade them, Prince Zhu Di explained that he was only coming to "help" his young nephew, the emperor, to rule China. To bolster his claims, Zhu Di relied on the important and valuable precedent of the ancient Duke of Zhou (eleventh century BCE), who came to serve his nephew King Cheng of Zhou (r. 1042-1021 BCE) when the latter was too young to govern. The Duke of Zhou, a hugely revered figure in China, ran the country wisely. When his nephew King Cheng came of age, the Duke let him assume power. In 1402 Zhu Di tried to say he was only doing the same thing, but the two Ming scholars were not impressed with this use of the revered precedent—after all, the Duke of Zhou did not kill his nephew. Lian Zining, the high ranking official, admonished the prince for what he was doing. In response, Zhu Di had Lian's tongue cut off. Still defiant, Lian "put his finger to his mouth and using his blood traced on the ground the sentence: 'Where is King Cheng [Emperor Jianwen]?'"

Frustrated, Zhu Di turned to the other scholar, Fang Xiaoru, and asked him to draft the announcement of his accession to power. Fang refused and called the prince a murderer. The following dialogue ensued:

<sup>6</sup> Irene Bloom has the first sentence of this passage thus: Mencius said, "In advising great men one should regard them with disdain and not look at their grandeur" (Bloom 164). Another translator has it thus: Mencius said, "When speaking to an important person, you should look on him with a degree of contempt and not be taken in by his lofty status (Muller).

<sup>7</sup> In using this phrase quotation marks I wish to make a distinction between "speaking truth to power" the celebrated practice of tenured academics in Manhattan since 1978, and situations in which speaking one's mind entails real and present danger. On Manhattan intellectuals see Wolfe (Wolfe).

Prince: "I modeled myself on the Duke of Zhou who served King Cheng and no more."

Fang: "Where is King Cheng [i.e., the slain Emperor Jianwen, Z.B.]?"

Prince: "He burned himself to death [in the palace]."

Fang: "Why don't you establish King Cheng's son as emperor?"

Prince: "The nation requires a mature ruler."

Fang: "Then why don't you establish King Cheng's younger brother as ruler?"

Prince: "These are my family's affairs, and that's all."

Agitated, Prince Zhu Di gave Fang Xiaoru the writing brush to prepare the announcement of his accession. Fang threw the brush to the ground and scornfully continued the argument in tears:

Fang: "If I must die, then so be it. I will not write the draft for the announcement."

Prince (loudly): "How can you expect to die so suddenly? In dying are you not concerned about your relatives to the ninth degree?"

Fang: "What does it matter to me if you make it to the tenth degree?" (qtd. in Elman 23).

Prince Zhu Di eventually found someone else to write the announcement and crowned himself as the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402-1424). He came to be one of the most potent and influential rulers in Chinese history.

Another case in question, the career and posthumous life of Hai Rui (1514-1587), an upright official in the Ming court, does not involve blood and brush, but is even more fascinating. Hai, initially a low-ranking provincial official known for his persistent honesty, was summoned to serve in the court of the Jiajing Emperor (r. 1521-1567). He quickly got himself in trouble when he criticized the monarch for neglecting his duties. Hai was sentenced to death in 1566. But, luckily for him, the emperor died before he was put to death, and he was pardoned. Hai was later reappointed twice to serve in other courts but was eventually sent home to retire (Miller 22-24). This prickly official would have remained forgotten, but history asked him to reappear. In 1959 Wu Han (1909-1969), a noted historian and then Vice Mayor of Beijing, wrote a play in which he retold the story. Entitled *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (*Hai Rui Ba Guan*) the play was originally commissioned by Mao Zedong himself. It depicted one short episode in Hai's life, in which he was fighting the court for the rights of poor peasants whose land was stolen. In fact, Mao's original intent was to encourage party officials to take risk and behave like Hai in speaking the truth. That was ironic since soon after things dramatically changed. In 1965 it was alleged that Wu, a historian of the Ming period (1368-1644), wrote the play in 1959 as an allegory for an incident that took place only a few months before in the Lushan Conference of the Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party (July-August 1959).<sup>8</sup> During the conference, Marshal Peng Dehuai (1898-1974), a hero of the revolution and then Defense Minister, sent a letter to Mao Zedong offering carefully worded criticism in the wake of the disastrous Great Leap Forward. Peng was dismissed and arrested soon after he turned in the letter. Peng's case was the first instance since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) that a high-ranking official was dismissed for criticizing Mao. This Communist war hero was discharged without protest from the party leadership, and no one dared to challenge Mao on it. Crucially, historical studies on Hai by Wu came out in perfectly bad timing. An essay entitled "Hai Rui Scolds the Emperor" came out just before Marshal Peng wrote to Mao. Another, "On Hai Rui" that raised "the theme of the 'Virtuous Official' who has been unjustly dismissed from office," came out right after Peng was dismissed. The timing and the change of atmosphere were tragic. *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* came to be seen as a thinly veiled criticism of Mao for dismissing the upright Marshal Peng within a context of general silence over the case. As history unfolded, the essay criticizing the play and accusing Wu of "using the past in order to satirize the present," marked the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (Ansley and Wu 106). It was published by Yao Wenyuan (1931-2005), a radical literary critic and future member of the notorious Gang of Four. Wu Han was denounced, an event that was the first in a chain of such actions that served as the fertile ground for massive waves of persecutions of intellectuals in China. Both Peng Dehuai and Wu Han suffered much during the Cultural Revolution and died (Mazur; Wagner).

These few stories, all involving matters of complicity and dissent, highlight a necessary distinction that I wish to make in my reading of the opening scenes of the *Mengzi*. The personalities involved in the tales above are all part of the court, embedded within the power structure, and serve it. The fact that they are serving the court is critical because it brings their moral convictions into perpetual conflict with power. That condition means that for the Confucian official serving the throne, matters of complicity and

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<sup>8</sup> Wu became very interested in the career of Hai Rui during the period and wrote a number of essays on hi before and after the time that he wrote the play (Wu 105-115, 159-180). The final version of the play, for the Peking Opera, came out in 1961 (Wu 532-587; Wu and Smith; Ansley and Wu).



dissent were an attendant question accompanying service. For Mengzi, as we have seen, this issue is of the utmost importance. He insists on the moral superiority of the sage, even when he comes to the court. A story Mengzi tells about the sage Zisi (c. 481–402 BCE) and Duke Mu of Lu (r. 415–383) explains his views concerning the relationship between ruler and sage most pointedly.

Duke Mu often went to visit Zisi and once said, "What about ancient rulers of states of a thousand chariots who befriended gentlemen [sages, Z.B.]?" Zisi was displeased and said, "The ancients had a saying about this, but it concerned paying service to gentlemen [sages], not befriending them." Was not Zisi's displeasure like saying: "As to position, you are the ruler, and I am the subject: how could I presume to treat my ruler as a friend? But when it comes to virtue, then you are paying service to me: how could you befriend me?" The lord of a thousand chariots could not succeed in befriending him, how much less could he summon him? (Eno, "Mencius" 118-199)

Zisi was Confucius's grandson and a great teacher in his own right. Duke Mu of the state of Lu, the birthplace of Confucius, was a famous patron of Confucian thinkers. He had a lot of respect for the grandson of his state's most renowned sage who was in his own right a person of great moral conviction. But the request for friendship with the ruler does not impress Zisi. In fact, it puzzles him: how can political power and moral authority be friends? Note, however, that Zisi, an intellectual that never hesitated to express disapproval of rulers, rejects the Duke's offer of friendship, but not the idea that they should be in conversation with each other. This point is crucial. The discussion about going to the court in *Mengzi* reminds us that only through engaging power can one put their moral convictions into effect. Mengzi is aware of the attendant dangers that engaging power entail—losing one's life, or worse, becoming complicit—but, for him, this is the only meaningful way to be an intellectual. On this note, it is important to realize that this story here, as the others above, speaks less about the "freedom" of the intellectual, and more about moral superiority tested vis-a-vis power. A story about the famous thinker Zhuangzi (fourth century BCE) highlights this distinction.

Once, when Zhuangzi was fishing in the River Pu, the king of Chu sent two officials to appear before him and convey these words: "I would like to burden you with the administration of my realm." Zhuangzi held on his fishing pole and, without looking round, he said, "I have heard that [the state of] Chu possesses a sacred turtle, dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed and stores it in the ancestral temple. This turtle, now, would it prefer to be dead with its bones preserved and honored, or to be alive with its tail dragging in the mud?" "Alive with its tail dragging in the mud," answered the two officials. "Then go away," said Zhuangzi. "I mean to drag my tail in the mud!" (Eno, "Zhuangzi" 35)

Zhuangzi, a thinker that is usually associated with an intellectual tradition other than Confucianism, refuses the offer to serve in the court.<sup>9</sup> The image of the scared boxed dead turtle wrapped in cloth as opposed to "dragging the tail in the mud" clarifies what this sage prefers and, indeed, it is a matter of "freedom." But the tale tells us, I suggest, that the question of intellectual freedom is meaningless. Away from the court, Zhuangzi is free to drag his tail in the mud as much he wants to. But what does this freedom mean to rulers, to people, to the society, and even to the sage himself? We will never know. When turtles drag their tails freely in the mud, they usually do it on their own, and no one is affected. The author of *Zhuangzi* wants to tell us precisely that when they place Zhuangzi at the bank of the river Pu fishing, and therefore probably alone. What value does his freedom have in such context? Moreover, note the absence of the question of moral superiority—so conspicuous in the *Mengzi* discussions—from this tale. It does not come into question since Zhuangzi is not even planning to go to the court. This absence helps us to distinguish between intellectual "freedom" and intellectual, moral superiority. When the sage enters into the dialogue with political power, they must assert their moral superiority, as opposed to "exercising" their intellectual "freedom."

Again, the image of the turtle allows us to understand further why the opening scenes in *Mengzi*, and many others like them, have him appear before rulers. This is a clear statement: only when power and morality face each other, one can engage and examine questions of complicity and dissent. Indeed, many of the conversations in *Mengzi* are set as dialogues between the sage and various monarchs in the court. The court functions as the main arena wherein the question of power and moral conviction is tested and investigated and where the possibilities of complicity and dissent emerge. Zhuangzi himself, a thinker that preferred to be alone and exercise his freedom of thought while fishing on the river bank, was aware of the attendant effects that the choice to engage power meant for the different type of

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<sup>9</sup> There has been some speculation that Zhuangzi should be counted among the early Confucians after all (Nylan).

intellectuals in ancient China. We close this section with an allegory in a passage where Zhuangzi has a madman mocking Confucius for his attempts to educate people about virtue:

When Confucius visited Chu, Jie Yu, the madman of Chu, wandered by his gate crying, "Phoenix, Phoenix, how has virtue failed! The future you cannot wait for; the past you cannot pursue. When the world has the Way, the sage succeeds; when the world is without the Way, the sage survives. [...] The mountain by its trees weakens itself. The grease which ministers to the fire fries itself. The cinnamon tree can be eaten, and therefore it is cut down. The varnish tree is useful, and therefore incisions are made in it. All men know the advantage of being useful, but no one knows the advantage of being useless. (Watson 33)<sup>10</sup>

Zhuangzi's most principled position is presented in the first part of the allegory: the sage's activities in the world are meaningless because ethical conduct is not really in his hands. If the world "has the way," then the sage succeeds. If the world does not have the way, all he has to do is "to survive"—an exciting proposition, suggesting that in moments such as the Zhu Di episode or the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals should either do what the ruler wants them to do or better yet, not be there, to begin with. The second part of the allegory suggests that Zhuangzi understands that trying the useful weakens the intellectual; therefore, he prefers to be useless.

Placing Zhuangzi next to Mengzi allows us to see the Confucian dilemma that many later officials like Lian Zining, Fang Xiaoru, Hai Rui, and the modern Peng Dehuai grappled with once they found themselves facing the ruler. Joining the court, "appearing before the ruler," could mean at some point dissenting and losing their lives, being eaten like the cinnamon tree. Thanks to the peculiarities of traditional, imperial Chinese history that exalted these men after their deaths, we can imagine numerous Chinese Confucian officials debating which of the two horns of the dilemma they prefer—to die and be remembered or to live and be forgotten.

### III. Facing the People

But, of course, the court is not the only place where intellectual commitment to moral principles and values is tested. Society, the people, is another arena. Let us recall Zengzi's words quoted above about the "village," a place where "age is foremost." Zengzi dismisses the village, a code for the arena where the "people" exist and interact. For him the village is a place where moral questions are never debated and all that one needs to respect is "age" (i.e. experience and seniority). In a similar vein, *Mengzi* confines itself to conversations between the sage Mengzi and rulers or between him and his disciples—the courts and putative locations where intellectuals meet, contend, learn. But in key locations, the book introduces us to another group of people that, so it appears, at least function as intellectuals. The discussion introducing this category of intellectuals begins with a strange sounding question posed by one of Mengzi's most prominent disciples, Wan Zhang. The conversation, an outlier of sorts, is the penultimate section of the entire book. Invoking Confucius, Wan Zhang asks his teacher: "Confucius said, 'Of those who pass my gate and do not enter my chamber, the ones I do not regret seeing pass by are the village charmers. The village charmer is a thief of virtue.'" "What sort of man is called a village charmer?" Wan Zhang is referring to the statement that indeed is found in the *Analects* (*Lunyu*) of Confucius where the great sage says: "The village charmers [good men of the village] are thieves of virtue" (Eno *Analects* 97). Indeed, in his *Analects*, the great sage does not explain what he means by his statement. He merely makes a very decisive statement in five short characters: "the village charmer is a thief of virtue" (*xiangyuan de zhi zei ye*). The quote invoking him in *Mengzi* is even harsher concerning this category of people.

Before we proceed to Mengzi's answer to Wan Zhang's question, let us have a tedious but quick philological pause and study the term *xiangyuan* that is translated here as "village charmers." This exercise is necessary because from this point on I will sometimes depart from Eno's translation and use the Chinese term itself. The first character of the term *xiangyuan*, *xiang*, means "village," or "township," or "one's native place,"—a locality, as opposed to the "court." It is evident from the discussion that in using *xiang*, Mengzi wants to imply most of all the idea that the village charmers live among the people, within their communities, and interact with the people there. Following this idea, one translator renders the term *xiangyuan* as "conventional townsmen" (Muller). It is also clear that these people sometimes

<sup>10</sup> The madman that speaks in this passage also appears in Confucius's *Analects*: "A madman of Chu [Jie Yu] encountered the chariot Confucius was driving, and walking across its path, intoned: *Phoenix, phoenix, How virtue has withered! What is past is beyond repairing, What is to come is still worth pursuing Enough, enough! Danger now for those at court.* Confucius stepped down, wishing to speak with him, but the madman hurried to dodge away, and Confucius was unable to speak with him" (Eno, "Analects" 100-1).

interact with superior sages. Confucius tells us that the *xiangyuan* are the only kind of people he is more than happy to avoid ("of those who pass my gate and do not enter my chamber, the ones I do not regret seeing pass are the village charmers"). The second character in the term *xiangyuan*, *yuan*, requires even greater attention. Robert Eno, the translator I am using here, renders *xiangyuan* as "village charmers," implying a measure of deceitfulness on the part of such people. But Eno's translation, in using "charmers," already provides us with a measure of interpretation derived from what these people do, or are accused of doing, that is quite removed from the original meaning of the term. Thus, we must consult other translations and get a more "neutral" one than "charmers." Other translations of the term *xiangyuan* have it as "village worthies" instead of "village charmers" (Ivanhoe and Van Norden; Sung). But this nod to a known term from early modern English Christian rural society still does not explain much (Leaths). James Legge (1815-1897), the great translator of Chinese classics, translated *xiangyuan* as "good, careful people of the villages" (263). Legge relied on generations of exegetes and commentators of *Mengzi* before his time, and indeed *yuan* has several meanings—"sincere," "honest" "virtuous," etc.<sup>11</sup> We can now understand better why the disciple Wan Zhang, a fourth century BCE Chinese thinker that was very close to the original meaning of the word *yuan*, is puzzled by Confucius's accusatory statement. How can people known to be honest or virtuous be accused of stealing virtue?

Mengzi's response to Wan Zhang's question reveals more about the nature of this social category, *xiangyuan*, and why they belong in this essay:

Such men say, 'What use is this grand ambition? What they say doesn't match what they do and what they do doesn't match what they say. They say, 'Ah, the ancients! The ancients!' And how snooty they are as they strut about! We live in this age, and we must adjust to this age. Getting along is good enough.' They behave as unctuous toadies to all around them: that is the village charmer. (Eno, "Mencius" 139)

In front of us, then, a case of people who are presented as "intellectually castrated" and behave as ingratiating hypocrites ("unctuous toadies" who "what they say doesn't match what they do"). This should explain why an upright sage with a healthy sense of moral superiority like Mengzi would not like them. But his answer reveals a little more. Mengzi points out several other problematic issues about the village charmers—they invoke the "ancients," code for their usage of past moral authorities when discussing contemporary ethical questions presented to them. Of course, invoking the ancients is what Mengzi expects of any intellectual. But the village charmers annoy him because, even though they invoke the ancients, they "adjust" themselves to their age to "get along" with the contemporary ethical mood. We should suspect by now that what Mengzi takes issue with is a situation in which people who seem to be virtuous hypocritically invoke an ancient sagely precedent, in effect surrendering to the moral norms of their age. In so doing, they steal virtue or, better yet, betray their duty to draw people towards to the Dao. This may explain why they are called thieves of virtue, but Wan Zhang keeps asking: "If everyone in the village calls him [the *xiangyuan*] a good man, and in no respect is he considered anything but good, why did Confucius say such a person is a thief of virtue?" (Eno, "Mencius" 139) Mengzi responds angrily and poetically:

There is nothing in his conduct to censure, nothing to criticize. He falls in with the customs of the day and blends in with a corrupt age. In his comportment at home he appears loyal and faithful, in his conduct abroad he seems pure and incorruptible, so everyone likes him, and he feels he is always in the right. But you cannot pursue the Dao of Yao and Shun with such a man. That is why Confucius called him a thief of virtue. Confucius said, 'I hate things that seem to be what they are not. I hate foxtail weeds, for fear they will corrupt crop seedlings. I hate flattery, for fear it will be corrupt righteousness. I hate artful speech, for fear it will corrupt good faith. I hate the melodies of Zheng, for fear they will corrupt music. I hate purple, for fear it will corrupt crimson. I hate the village charmers, for fear they will corrupt virtue. (Eno, "Mencius" 160)

Why is Mengzi so angry? Scholars that study the problem of the *xiangyuan* have tended to pay attention to the hypocritical dimension of their behavior, hence Eno's choice to translate the term as "charmers." But to my mind, the emphasis on their behavior, which indeed could be seen as hypocritical, curtains the possibility that the village worthies are first of all intellectuals. They might be the lowest category of the people that possess *de* (virtue), but they are certainly participating in the culture of communicating it to people, whether "true" sages like Kongzi and Mengzi like it or not (and they clearly do not). The first evidence supporting the possibility that we are in fact speaking of intellectuals of some sort is Mengzi and Kongzi's anger about them. The two use powerful words with regards to this category of people, and this raises the possibility that they see them as rivals and even dangerous. Kongzi, usually

<sup>11</sup> This property of the character stems from its most ancient meaning: "plain" "straight."

a mellow speaker, is quoted using the strong verb "hate" (Ch. e) several times. Recall also that he says that he is happy when they pass by his door and do not come in—a strong statement coming from someone that insisted all his life on propriety and decorum. Mengzi lends further support for this possibility that these people are intellectual, at least seen by some as such, when he declared that one "cannot pursue the Dao of Yao and Shun" with such people. This means that he knows that the *xiangyuan* do engage in pursuing the *Dao*, what makes intellectuals and moral guides, at least for some, in society. That is the thing that angers him so much. In short, Mengzi and Kongzi hate the *xiangyuan* so much because they see them as rivals.

But there is more. Mengzi faults the *xiangyuan* for the fact that nothing they say can be censured or criticized. One could understand this accusation to mean that what they say is meaningless precisely because it cannot be refuted or countered. Mengzi knows that the village charmer's immunity from censorship or criticism does not stem from moral conviction but the precise opposite: some intellectuals cleverly construct their arguments in a way that never elicits resistance. In *The Captive Mind*, Miłosz suggests at some point that complicit intellectuals act out of "an internal longing for harmony and happiness that lies deeper than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction (Miłosz 6). The village charmers seem to have attained this state of harmony, with themselves and with the people surrounding them. Mengzi hates this harmony. Mengzi is suspicious of people that always seem "pure and incorruptible" and "loyal and faithful." To his mind, a true intellectual must at least sometimes conduct their conversations with rulers, and with the people, with a certain degree of friction. This is the tension between power and morality that must come from the acute sense of the special position of the intellectual in society. This position of the person possessing virtue (*de*) precisely because of their uncompromising pursuit of the *dao of the ancients*. This position is uncompromising because, as Mengzi defines it, the duty of the intellectual is to educate the ruler and "draw" them, as we have seen, "towards the *Dao* and setting [their] mind upon humanity and nothing else." The decisive ending, "nothing else," (*er yi*) signals here Mengzi's uncompromising insistence on this particular role of the intellectual. For Mengzi, an intellectual whose duty is to "draw the ruler towards the *Dao*" always has to face the question of complicity and dissent. An intellectual-like village charmer never faces it because he is always in agreement with the moral mood of the time and therefore never insists on their moral superiority.

Mengzi concludes this discussion with the following statement that explains why the village charmer is so different in comparison to true intellectuals when it comes to educating the people. "The junzi returns to the enduring standard. When the standard is correct, the common people will be raised up, and when the common people are raised up, there will be no more deviance and error." That is to say, the intellectual's return to, even insistence on, the enduring standard will "raise up" and "correct" the people. In a world dominated by intellectuals of the "village charmer" type, who do not return to the enduring standard, people will never be raised up.

#### **IV. The Intellectual and the Officer**

The talk about "enduring standard" and the intellectual's duty towards it brings us to Julien Benda. As I have stated above, my aim here is to read certain intellectual problems from different times and place them in conversation with one another. Reading Mengzi as part of this exercise should help us to read Julien Benda, arguably the most famous writer concerned with the place of the intellectual in the modern western tradition. In his foreword to his *La Trahison des Clercs*, or *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, Julien Benda takes us to a war zone. It depicts a conversation between Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and an unnamed Russian officer:

Tolstoi relates that when he was in the Army, he saw one of his brother officers strike a man who fell out from the ranks during a march. Tolstoi said to him: —

"Are you not ashamed to treat a fellow human being in this way? Have you not read the Gospels?"

The other officer replied: —

"And have you not read Army Orders?" (Benda 30)

Let us take a closer look. Tolstoy and his colleague are both officers in the Russian army. Both are committed to the army's orders. But Tolstoy is appalled by his fellow officer's behavior when he sees him beating a soldier. When he admonishes the officer, Tolstoy invokes scripture, an ancient guide to human behavior that is supposed to be above time. The officer responds quickly with another guide—the Army Orders, a document produced within the context of a war for a modern army fighting a national war. The Army Orders are the guide that allows the officer to beat the soldier. Tolstoy speaks in the name of timeless morality that exists above the "here and now" and "reality." The unnamed officer

speaks in the name of something that belongs in the here and now and will certainly disappear soon. Tolstoy was shaken by this episode and by this response. Conversations with fellow officers kept coming back in his works, diaries, and letters, in which he often invoked scripture against the army or government orders.<sup>12</sup>

For Benda, this conversation between Tolstoy and the officer is the epitome of the problem he addresses in his *Treason of the Intellectuals*—the timeless virtue that is deserted—betrayed—when reality calls for different norms. Benda laments the unnamed officer's retort with a hint of sarcasm, "will always be thrown back at the spiritual man who tries to take the direction of the material. To me, it seems a very wise one. Those who lead men to the conquest of material things have no need of justice and charity" (Benda 30). The unnamed officer in Tolstoy's story is what Benda would call a "realist," someone that adheres to the values of the present time, as opposed to true the intellectual, who is supposed to be committed to eternal, everlasting morality. There should be an unbridgeable rift between the timeless ethical values to which Tolstoy, the officer turned intellectual, and the Army Orders that the unnamed officer upholds. According to Benda, civilization, therefore, is born out of the rift between the timeless morality to which intellectuals, the clerks in Benda's words, should be committed on the one hand, and the "realism of the people" on the other. It is the intellectuals' duty to keep the rift unbridgeable. When they begin to close it by getting closer to the "passions" of their times, they betray their calling. And Benda explains, "[I]t may be said that, thanks to the 'clerks,' humanity did evil for two thousand years, but honored good. This contradiction was an honor to the human species and formed the rift whereby civilization slipped into the world" (Benda 65).

How would Mengzi read Benda and his reading of Tolstoy? In engaging and admonishing the officer, Tolstoy invokes the ancients—the timeless guide for moral conduct—to draw the officer towards the Dao and humanity. The officer responds by invoking a contemporary authority suggesting that he is following the guidelines of the time. In this scene, Tolstoy's enters into a conflict, a necessary battle, with the social norms of his time. The officer, on the other hand, is like the village charmer—immune to censorship or criticism because he is hiding behind the Army Orders. Moreover, in committing himself to the realism of the people, the army officer, like the village charmer, can be read as saying "we live in this age and we must adjust to this age. Getting along is good enough." We can bet the officer's response to Tolstoy would annoy Mengzi just as it annoys Benda. Recall Benda's sarcastic characterization of the officer's response, "to me it is a wise one." "Wise" in the sense that Mengzi would call an "artful speech" that corrupts virtue. Finally, we can also read the officer's response as if he were saying "I am only following orders." In so doing, the officer behaves, as Mengzi would say, like one of the "unctuous toadies" or castrated intellectuals that gave up their moral convictions.

Moreover, Benda's argument about the intellectual's duty concerning the "unbridgeable rift" between "timeless morality" and the "realism of the people" recalls Mengzi's words about insisting on the moral superiority of the intellectual. As we have seen, for Mengzi true intellectuals must always insist on their moral superiority even if, or precisely because, such a position puts them in a conflictual relationship with rulers and people. In other words, the constant friction between sage and ruler must always be maintained. If one is an intellectual who "everyone praises" (like the village charmer), Mengzi would say that something is very wrong with that person. This is quite similar to Benda's characterization of the intellectual. Benda's intellectuals have been insisting on timeless morality for "2000 years" while being clearly at odds with their societies. They have been failing in their mission to "raise people up," to use Mengzi's words, because "humanity kept doing evil." But thanks to their insistence on an "enduring standard," humanity at least "honored the good." (The case of Prince Zhu Di comes mind: he committed evil by killing his nephew but honored good by invoking the case of the Duke of Zhou and trying to gain legitimacy through recruiting to upright officials) For Benda, this condition of constant contradiction is the "rift through which civilization slipped into the world," no less. It seems to me that Mengzi would agree.

The point about civilization being born out of the gap between good and evil produced by intellectual calls for some further thinking. Writing in the early part of the twentieth century, Benda marshals his indictment of the intellectuals of his time (Niess 383-92). (He had yet to see what the rest of the century was preparing—plenty of opportunities for intellectuals to betray their calling) That is to say, the clerics, the medieval term that Benda invokes for what we call "intellectuals," had aligned themselves with the contemporary values of their time, the "game of political passions." In so doing, they have betrayed their role: to be a "check on the realism of the people" by insisting that humanity at least honors "the good." Benda readily admits that the clerks have failed in their long-standing mission: despite their

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Tolstoy's long elaborations on the question of killing people during a war in his "Letter to A Non-Commissioned Officer" (Tolstoy).

insistence on honoring the good, humanity "did evil." But it was thanks to their insistence that humanity honors the good that "the rift whereby civilization slipped into the world" came to be. When the clerks betrayed their old mission and became aligned with the passions of their time—in this case, the late nineteenth century—they became the stimulators of political wrongs in service of rulers and governments. As he explains, "[N]ow, at the end of the nineteenth century a fundamental change occurred: the 'clerks' began to play the game of political passions. The men who had acted as a check on the realism of the people began to act as its stimulators" (Benda 65). "I only say," explains Benda later in the book, that the "'clerks' who indulged in this fanaticism betrayed their duty, which is precisely to set up a corporation whose sole cult is that of justice and of truth, in opposition to the peoples and the injustice to which they are condemned by their religions of this earth" (Benda 74). In other words, the intellectuals turned to village charmers and instead of standing in opposition to the people in the name of justice and truth they started to play the contemporary game of political passions. In so doing, not only they did they enable the "realism" of the people, they stimulated it.

And so, when the rift disappears, civilization is no longer possible. In his introduction to the newest edition of his book, Roger Kimball states that Benda "understood that the stakes were high: the treason of the intellectuals signaled not simply the corruption of a bunch of scribblers but a fundamental betrayal of culture" (Kimball 13). Benda goes on explain how this "upheaval in the moral behavior of humanity" operated in the rest of his book. It is hard to do justice to Benda's elaboration on the theme of the betrayal of the intellectuals (Kimball 14). Risking an almost unforgivable reduction, one could say that Benda's indictment rests on two main elements. First, the "modern intellectuals" have betrayed their duty by deserting the timeless, the spiritual, and the universal for the sake of the material, the contemporary, and the particular. They have become "devoted" to particular nations, classes, and contemporary political creeds, for instance, and in so doing they have deserted moral values that transcend time. As a result, for instance, "the modern moralists extol the warrior at the expense of the man of justice. They also extol him at the expense of the man of learning and, there again, they preach to the world the cult of practical activity in defiance of the disinterested life" (Benda 134). The intellectual tradition in which Benda writes and the circumstances he addresses are very different from the what we read in *Mengzi*. But one could hear echoes of Mengzi's insistence on the basic removal of the intellectual from the political realm in the sense that even if they engage power, they *must* do so on their own moral terms.

Benda also indicts intellectuals for their use of their status and skills to promote the political passions of their times. Worse still, some of the "modern intellectuals" do not hesitate even to "claim that in preaching inhumanity they are only continuing the teaching of their great ancestors" (Benda 174). Modern intellectuals do not hesitate to invoke false or fake moral high grounds, and use them for their purposes and, worse, for their own self-aggrandizing as intellectuals. Today, says Benda, the desire "to abase the values of knowledge before the values of action" inspires "not only the moralist, but another kind of 'clerk' who speaks from much higher ground." As he explains,

[I am] referring to that teaching of modern metaphysics which exhorts man to feel comparatively little esteem for the truly thinking portion of himself and to honor the active and willing part of himself with all his devotion. The theory of knowledge from which humanity has taken its values during the past half-century assigns a secondary rank to the mind which proceeds by clear and distinct ideas, by categories, by words, and places in the highest rank the mind which succeeds in liberating itself from these intellectual habits and in becoming conscious of itself insofar as it is a 'pure tendency,' a 'pure will,' a 'pure activity.' Philosophy which formerly raised man to feel conscious of himself because he was a thinking being and to say, 'I think, therefore I am,' now raises him to say, 'I am, therefore I think,' 'I think. Therefore, I am not,' (unless he takes thought into consideration only in that humble region where it is confused with action). (Benda 140)

The root of all evil, at the risk of reducing Benda once more, is the modern intellectuals' relationship with their present time and history:

[I] should like to point out another form, not the least remarkable, which this preaching of particularism assumes among the 'clerks.' I mean their exhortations to consider everything only as it *exists in time*, that is as it constitutes a succession of particular states, a "*becoming*," a "*history*," and never as it presents a state of permanence beyond time under this succession of distinct cases. I mean especially their assertion that this view of things in their historical aspect is the only serious and philosophical view, and that the need to look at them in their eternal aspect is a form of the child's taste for ghosts and should be merely smiled at. Need I point out that this conception inspires the whole of modern thought?" (Benda 107. Italics mine)

Benda's words about intellectuals invoking "fake moral high ground" and using their status and skills in order "promote the political passions of their times" corresponds nicely with Mengzi's words about the

village charmers. Recall that the term *xiangyuan* refers to the status of these type of intellectuals as "good people." Let us also remember that Mengzi faults them for using their skills in such a way that no one finds any problem with them or with what they say. But, clearly, the worse problem stems from the intellectuals' betrayal of an "enduring standard," to use Mengzi's word, and "aligning themselves with their time." This brings to mind Mengzi's indictment of the village charmers when he has them as saying "we live in this age and we must adjust to this age." Benda's treasonous intellectuals, to put it crudely, are Mengzi's thieves of virtue. Interestingly enough, Benda also addresses the question of why the intellectuals of his generation behave in the way he describes. Mengzi, in the various translations above, implies hypocrisy; Benda, on the other hand, makes frequent remarks relating to the "egotism" of the intellectuals as at least of one of their motivations for their behavior (Benda 40-41, 64-65, 92-93, 99, 102, 113, 121, 152, 160, 165, 184, 191).

## V. Concluding Remarks

Let me conclude with Benda's notion of rift between "timeless morality" and the "realism of the people," the aperture "through which civilization is born." The rift is crucial, it gives birth to the intellectual and it is the intellectual's duty to maintain it, not to bridge it. When the rift disappears, civilization is no longer possible. Mengzi would agree, I think: "his" type of intellectuals maintain that the rift can never be bridged; the "village charmers" bridge the rift with their nice words, thereby bringing civilization to an end. Perhaps the biggest fear of those intellectuals greatly concerned with complicity is the fear that they will be left alone and that the moral tradition—civilization, no less—they uphold will die with them. I mentioned above in passing that the discussion concerning the thievery of virtue is the penultimate conversation in the book. The section is an outlier of sorts. It is concerned with the behavior of another category of intellectuals, not with Mengzi himself nor the tradition he imagines. It is not concerned with morality, but with how it is betrayed or "stolen." Why did the editors of *Mengzi* include it in the book, and why did they locate it just before the end of the book? The answer, to my mind, hides in the very last passage of the book that comes right after the discussion about the thievery of virtue:

Mencius said, "From the time of Yao and Shun to the time of Tang it was over five hundred years. Men like Yu and Gaoyao saw Yao and Shun with their own eyes, while men like Tang only heard about them. From the time of Tang to the time of King Wen it was over five hundred years. Men like Yi Yin and Lai Zhu saw Tang with their own eyes, while men like King Wen only heard about him. From the time of King Wen to the time of Confucius it was over five hundred years. Men like Tai Gong Wang and Sanyi Sheng saw King Wen with their own eyes, while men like Confucius only heard about him. From the time of Confucius to the present it is only a century and over. We are still not far from the time of the sage, and we are dwelling so near to his homeland! Yet if there is no one to follow him, well, then, there is simply no one to follow him. (Eno, "Mencius" 140)

In this passage, Mengzi does the accounting of his intellectual tradition. He describes the lineage of virtue originating in Yan and Shun over the years leading up to his days. It is a very pessimistic account. Even though many centuries had passed from Yao and Shun, there were always people that kept their virtue also if they only heard about them and did not get to witness their conduct and actions. By Mengzi's account, over a thousand years passed from Yao and Shun until the time of Kongzi and the tradition was kept. Great men like Tang or King Wen and great sages like Tai Gong Wang or Sanyi Sheng kept it alive by insisting on what is "right" and, Benda would say, maintaining "the rift through which civilization slipped into the world." But coming to his own time, only a little over a century after Kongzi, Mengzi sounds very pessimistic. He and his disciples are not far removed from the great sage, temporally nor geographically. Mengzi is not sure that the tradition will survive. He declares, "[Y]et if there is no one to follow him [Kongzi], well, then, there is simply no one to follow him." Another translator tries to capture an even greater sense of emergency in these words: "[W]e are so little removed from the time of the sage [Kongzi], and so close to the place where he dwelled. Is there then no one? Is there no one?" (Bloom 166).

These words, betraying resignation and even a sense of defeat, are the very last words of a book that proudly insists on the uncompromising moral superiority of a lineage of intellectuals. Despite their slight nuances, both versions of the passage present Mengzi as pessimistic about the continuity of his intellectual tradition. He practically foresees its near-death. Most probably, he also contemplates his failure with regards to "return to the enduring standard," "drawing rulers towards the Dao," and "raising the people up." This ending helps us to understand the discussion about the thievery of virtue that precedes this lamentation. The rise and success of a group of intellectuals that stole virtue is at least one of the reasons why Mengzi closes his book with a sense of failure.

I would like to close by invoking the anxiety I suggested above, one that both Mengzi and Benda share, and quite acutely (and also narcissistically), about the disappearance of upright intellectuals in their times. It is interesting to think about how Benda closes his book. Having described how scores of intellectuals succumbed to the passions of their time and betrayed their calling Benda asks, "[I]s this adoption of 'integral realism' by the human species permanent, or merely temporary? Are we, as some people think, witnessing the beginning of a new Middle Ages (and one far more barbarous than the former, for though it practiced realism, it did not extol realism), from which, however, will arise a new Renaissance, a new return to the religion of disinterestedness?" (Benda 191-192) Benda answers the question with an account of the Western tradition in the past 2000 years:

It is still harder to imagine [a "body of men of letters"] turning against the tide of their intellectual decadence and ceasing to think that they display a lofty culture when they sneer at rational morality and fall on their knees before history. Nevertheless, one thinks of a humanity of the future, weary of its "sacred egotisms" and the slaughterings to which they inevitably lead, coming as humanity came two thousand years ago, to the acceptance of a good situated beyond itself, accepting it even more ardently than before, with the knowledge of all the tears and blood that have been shed through departing from that doctrine. (Benda 192).

Benda does not rule out the possibility of re-turning away from decadence and treason, but he is skeptical: "When I set this limit to my pessimistic outlook and admit that such a Renaissance is possible, I mean no more than that it is just possible." One can almost hear Mengzi behind Benda asking: "Is there then no one? Is there no one?"

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