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ZHU YUANZHANG BOWDLERIZES *MENCIUS*

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[Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming dynasty (which threw out the Mongols) began his career as a peasant rebel, and in contemporary political writing sometimes figures as a kind of stand-in for Mao Zedong. This essay focuses on Zhu's hostility to the more democratic ideas of the sage Mencius. There is no evidence from the essay itself that Zhu here should be understood as a symbol for Mao. But he is clearly a symbol for contemporary figures who would restrict freedom of speech and hold on to power by intimidating others.]

There are two Sages in Chinese history: the Supreme Sage Confucius and the Secondary Sage Mencius. Emperors throughout the ages have had to make use of the Way of Confucius and Mencius in order to rule the common people, so there was no end of the respect paid to these two Sages. They were honored in their temples around the clock. Emperors would drive out at different times to the solemn grounds at Qufu [\[1\]](#) to kowtow to these two, in order to show their esteem for the Confucian teachings. Thus, Confucius was called the “uncrowned king of a hundred generations.” Former visitors to Qufu saw that the scale of the Confucius temple and Confucius mansion was on the scale of the Palace in Beijing. In effect, it amounted to an imperial palace, conveying the same impression of prestige.

However, Zhu Yuanzhang [1328-1398], the founding ruler of the Ming dynasty, was a peasant by birth; he made his fortune through rebellion; he had been a monk and a bandit. He had a certain sensitivity concerning culture and cultured people. For this reason he did not buy into notions of the sages, and he had a particular resentment of Mencius. In the second year of Hongwu (1370), he issued an order for the destruction of Mencius's tablet and his removal from the literary temple. Mencius was no more to be venerated. The whole court, both civil and military officials, dawdled, not knowing what to do. They were all disciples of Confucius and Mencius. It would not do to fail to carry out the order, but they also felt that to obey the order would be very wrong. Fortunately, an astronomer spoke up. He said the Heavens were showing signs of anger. Had His Majesty perhaps made some fault of policy that would cause Heaven to feel uneasy?

Zhu Yuanzhang hesitated and grew doubtful. First of all, when it came down to it he was a peasant—moreover, a poor peasant who had labored naked in the fields, utterly dependent on Heaven for his livelihood. He had an innate fear of Heaven. No one on earth dared show anger toward him, but the Old Man in the Sky could show anger. He could not but feel uneasy. Secondly, no matter that he was the Son of Heaven and no one could stand against him—no matter how fierce and brave he was, his fate as in the hands of the Old Man in the Sky. If the King of Hell summoned him in the middle of the night, he could not hope to dally until the dawn. So in the end that peasant-by-nature withdrew his order

and allowed the continued veneration of Mencius. This farce by the peasant emperor is recorded in a book compiled during the Qing dynasty.

In Chinese history there have been emperors who have ordered their subordinates beaten, even beaten to death. The Zhu kings of the Ming dynasty were the fiercest in that regard. Zhu Yuanzhang implicated numberless people in plots against himself. His punishments were ferocious, enough to annihilate human nature: for example, skinning people alive or cutting them in half at the waist. The court was filled with eunuchs and also others who acted as secret agents. The Eastern Factory and the Western Factory brought terror to the lives of ordinary people.

For reasons such as this some people say that the numbers of those killed after Zhu Yuanzhang possessed the mountains and rivers exceed those killed before he came to power. The historical records do not contain precise statistics, so it is difficult to know whether this is literally true. But it is known that this, one of the great tyrants of history, caused the deaths of his own children and kin and of his closest friends. His relations with his officials and with the people hung by the slenderest of threads. In those days, before the high officials would be off to attend morning court, as they left the threshold the members of their household would come out to say good-bye, wiping away their tears. This is because no one could know whether they would be returning after court was over.

Meng Ke was a man of the Warring States ^[2] era. How could he do wrong to the Ming dynasty's Zhu Yuanzhang? This is a question that no one at the time dared to look into. If you did dare, you risked getting your head chopped off. By 1388, 20 years after the order to purge Mencius, court officials high and low had completely forgotten about this thing. They had, however, not anticipated the malice of petty people, who pointed out that the order had no expiration date. His hatred of the Second Sage was revived. Zhu Yuanzhang then issued an order decreeing that the book of *Mencius* should be destroyed. People were finally able to understand the reasons for this hatred.

In the feudal society under the examination system the *Great Learning*, the *Mean*, the *Analecets*, and *Mencius* constituted the basic scholarly texts. They were called the Four Books. They now became the "Three Books," and there was no opportunity to study the fourth one. The Emperor then issued a command that a volume, *Selections from Mencius*, be published throughout the whole country. In this volume all those passages from the original work that he did not like, that he did not want to hear about, that aroused his resentment were expunged. He screamed at the compilers of that work, "If that old bastard were around today and if he fell into my hands, I'd have him put to death!"

Take a look at the passages of the *Mencius* that were expurgated by Zhu Yuanzhang: "The people are the most precious; the Grain Altars come after that; the ruler is the least"; "If the ruler regards his officials as grass, the officials will regard the ruler as a bandit and an enemy"; "A tyrant and a thief is of no count; I've heard that a no-count fellow

named Zhou was executed; I've never heard of a ruler being killed.” From passages such as these we can understand Zhu Yuanzhang's hatred of Mencius. The people were at the root of Mencius's thinking. He didn't think that much of the Emperor, but had a higher opinion of the common people. Could this be tolerated? It is exactly the sort of thing that will antagonize a no-count gangster who has come into possession of the rivers and mountains. Add to this his low cultural level and his suspicion and jealousy of intellectuals, and it is only natural that he would want to expel Mencius from the Temples of Literature.

Indeed, throughout history there have been numbers of Emperors without any cultural attainment and who as a consequence have been jealous and suspicious of intellectuals. But the problem is that in the end they all had to support culture and civilization or else they would not have been able to sustain their rule. The High Ancestor of the Han, Liu Bang, once he became Emperor enjoyed snatching off the hats of the Confucians and using them as chamber pots. But later he himself and the companions who had helped him to power all undertook the study of ritual. When he returned to his native place he sighed: “The wind begins to blow and the clouds fly by”—he even attempted to become a poet.

Zhu Yuanzhang alone was the only one stubbornly to maintain this narrow petty peasant psychology. He consistently refused to have anything to do with Mencius.

This *Selections from Mencius* continued in use even after his sons and grandsons succeeded to the throne, but it was no longer so vigorously promoted. Later on it faded away, and later still people gradually forgot there ever had been such a farce. It is said that the National Library still contains this volume, but it has the status of a rare book. Ordinary readers are unable to borrow it.

Perhaps this is an instance of historical dialectics—a stream one attempts to block will nonetheless continue to flow. In the end this has become a laughing stock, a topic of conversation and nothing else.

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[1] Confucius's home town, in Shandong province.

[2] Roughly 400-221 BC.

[3] The name of the last, wicked king of the Yin or Shang dynasty, who was overthrown by the Zhou (周) conquerors, is also transliterated Zhou (紂).