

The Dates of Mencius

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Abstract. The birth and death dates of Mencius are an old conundrum in Sinology. I find that the received dates were intentionally altered from a plausible original.

Data. A Register of the M̀ng Clan 孟氏譜, of unknown provenance, gives the birth date of Mencius as 周 [貞] 定王三十七年四月二日生 and the death date as 赧王二十六年正月十五日卒. That is, on the day of his death he had not yet reached his birthday in that year. The Register specifies an age of 84 at death, and says that Mencius was born “35 years after Confucius.” This is doubtful at several points, and Chyén M̀ (1/187) rejects it. The difficulties are these: (1) There was no 37th year of [J̀ng]-dìng-wáng (r 0468-0441); his last year of reign was his 28th. Substituting “35 years after Confucius” (0479 – 35 = 0444) for the date of his birth, we get the 25th year of Dìng-wáng. There *was* such a year, but it would make Mencius 125 years old when he saw Lyáng Hwèi-wáng in 0320.¹ And the death date Nǎn-wáng 15 (0289) would give the lifespan 0444-0289 (156 years), both at odds with the claimed 84 years.

Emendations. Jōu Gwǎng-yè 周廣業 (1730-1798) suggests the following:

Original: Birth 安王 十七年 0385 Death: 赧王十二 年 0303 (or 十三年 0302)
Corrupt: Birth 定王三十七年 Death: 赧王二十六年

Jōu’s restored original would give Mencius the dates 0385-0303. The supposed corruptions are plausible: 定 for graphically similar 安, dittography of 王 as 三, and metathesis of 十 and 二, are kinds of scribal errors that do occur, but so many errors in one space are unlikely. It seems instead that someone familiar with scribal errors has altered the record in such a way as to make the original *seem* the result of scribal error.

Why the false record? Locating Mencius’s birth at 35 years after Confucius puts him within 40 years or one transmission generation after Confucius (that is, within the claimed lifespan of Dž-sž, implying an unbroken succession of orthodox teaching: Confucius to Dž-sž to Mencius). Separately, the death date 0289 makes more plausible the MC 3B5 remark on the impending Chí invasion of S̀ng (0286). This is not scribal corruption; it is pious hagiography, supporting Confucian orthodoxy on the one hand, and validating all the “Mencius” sayings as genuine on the other.

Jōu’s first choice for the original deathdate (十二年) gives an age of 83 at death; he must go to the less convincing 十三年 to arrive at a total of 84 years (that detail may belong to the original record, whereas “35 years after Confucius” is likelier to be part of the revision). I have nothing better to suggest, and accept Jōu’s second version: Mencius, then, lived from 0385 to 0302, and died at the age of 84.

¹This is my date; the Shǐ Jì chronology is disturbed at this point.

Reflections

The Invasion of Sùng. MC 3B5, which has Mencius and others anticipating this invasion, is reminiscent of LY 16:1, where “Confucius” scolds two disciples for failing to halt a “Jì clan” attack on some city. This is probably a veiled reference to the Chí attack on Sùng. Both passages imply that the intent of Chí was known in advance, and the Jàn-gwó Tsù narrates some preliminary stages: isolating Sùng from its ally Chǔ (#477-478) and publicizing alleged atrocities committed by the King of Sùng (#479). MC 3B5 knows of collusion between Chí and Chǔ, and denies that Sùng is practicing a Mencian type of virtuous government. “Mencius” in 3B5 mentions earlier cases of atrocities by bad rulers, so that part of the JGT picture is also present in the Mencius.² The JGT inventions may then have had some foundation in earlier historical fact.

Myth. We find that MC 3B5 was written in c0256, more than a generation after the conquest of Sùng; this gap was evidently enough for the anachronistic 3B5 to seem plausible. Still more rapid is the mythologizing of Lǎu Dān, who died in c0286, but who, *within* a generation, was being portrayed in the Jwāngdǔ as older than Confucius, and indeed as reproving the misguided Confucius.

Sǒu 叟. This is the term by which Mencius is addressed by Lyáng Hwèi-wáng in MC 1A1 and in 1A5.³ It means “old.” How old? The usual synonym is lǎo 老 “old,” for which the threshold figure 70 is often given; commentators to the Analects and Gwāngdǔ also give 60, or even 50, as the beginning of “old age.” The other occurrence of sǒu in Mencius refers to the Shī master Gāu Sǒu 高叟 and disputes his gù 固 “rigid” interpretation. As the proprietor of a Shī interpretation, Gāu should be within the age range 30-70, the modal 40-year transmission generation, and thus less than 70. By the Jōu Gwǎng-yè reconstruction, Mencius was 66 when he met Lyáng Hwèi-wáng in 0320, and thus also less than 70. We may do best to see sǒu as a term of respect for the proprietor of an interpretation system, toward the end of his tenure in that position. And Mencius had indeed come to Ngwèi as the proprietor of a system. The King had apparently been trying unsuccessfully to apply what he had thought of as that system, and very naturally wanted to get clarification from its founder. There is no problem.

Works Cited

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²There are reasons to date MC 3 to the mid 03c; see Brooks **Nature** and Im **Tensions**.

³See Brooks **Interviews**.