

## What Did Zēng Zǐ 曾子 “Guard Over” in MC 2A2?

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**Introduction.** The way we understand a pair of lines from the famous hàorán zhī qì passage in MC 2A2 has important consequences for the manner in which we view the relationship Mèng Zǐ portrays as proper between the mind (xīn) and the vital energy (qì). This will in turn determine how we comprehend certain passages by other thinkers who lived more or less contemporaneously with Mèng Zǐ.<sup>1</sup>

**MC 2A2** contains the following discussion of “courage:”

2:1. “Is there a way to not have the mind stirred?”

2:2. “There is. Běigōng Yǒu’s cultivation of courage was such that his skin would not wince and his eyes would not flinch; he thought that to receive the slightest insult from another would be like getting whipped in the marketplace. He would not take anything from a coarsely-clad commoner, and neither would he take it from the ruler of a state of 10,000 chariots; he viewed stabbing the ruler of such a state the same as he would stabbing the commoner. There were no feudal lords whom he held in awe. If an unpleasant remark came his way, he would invariably react against it.

2:3. “Mèngshī Shè’s cultivation of courage was such that he would say: ‘[I] view not gaining victory as [I] would being victorious. To advance only after sizing up the enemy, to meet [in battle] only after considering the prospects of victory – these are [the actions of] someone who lies in fear of armed forces. How could I guarantee victory? I can merely be without fear, and that is all.’”

2:4. “Mèngshī Shè resembled Zēng Zǐ, and Běigōng Yǒu resembled Zǐxià. Now I cannot ascertain which of the two gentlemen was more worthy; however, Mèngshī Shè guarded over [his qì] more firmly.”

2:5. “Formerly, Zēng Zǐ stated to Zǐxiāng: ‘Are you fond of courage? I once heard of great courage from the Master: if I reflect upon myself and [find] I am not upright, then although it be a coarsely-clad commoner, I will not intimidate him; if I reflect upon myself and [find] I am upright, then though they number in the thousands, I will go off [to confront them].’<sup>2</sup> Mèngshī Shè did not, in turn, guard over his vital energy as firmly as did Zēng Zǐ.”

<sup>1</sup>For an interpretation of MC 2A2 and its relation to the thought of the Zhuāng Zǐ, see Cook **Carving**. For a partial annotated translation, with reactions to Riegel’s interpretations, see Cook **Unity** 277-291. Paragraph numbering below is compatible with the latter.

<sup>2</sup>According to Zhào Qí, Zǐxiāng was a disciple of Zēng Zǐ. “The Master” must refer to Zēng Zǐ’s master, Kǒng Zǐ. For the phrase wú bù zhù yán 吾不憚焉, I adopt the causative reading of Zhào Qí, rather than that proposed by Wáng Fūzhī and Yán Ruòjù, who turn bù 不 into an interrogative with rhetorical force: “Would I not be frightened?”

The point in question here is the interpretation of the two parallel lines that end paragraphs 2A2:4 and 2A2:5:

- 然而孟施舍守約也  
 (2A2:4): However, Mèngshī Shè guarded over [his qì] more firmly . . .  
 孟施舍之守氣，又不如曾子之守約也  
 (2A2:5): Mèngshī Shè did not, in turn, guard over his vital energy (qì) as firmly as did Zēng Zǐ

My interpretation of these lines differs in some respects from that of all previous commentaries that I am aware of, and thus calls for some discussion.

### 1. That Zēng Zǐ Did Not Preserve “Something Essential”

The first question is how to understand the function of yuē 約 in the two lines. Commentators from Zhào Qí 趙岐 (- 201?) onward have regarded it not as the object of shǒu 守 but as a predicate adjective of the *nominalized* verb shǒu. In English translation, this becomes an adverb describing, comparatively, the manners in which the verbal “guarding over” is performed. Among the interpretations of yuē are “essential” (yuēyào 約要; Zhào Qí, Zhū Xī) and “simple and dependable” (jiǎnyì kěshì 簡易可恃; Wáng Fūzhī). Zhū Xī emphasizes this by using the nominalizing particle suǒ 所: “論其所守，則舍比於黜，為得其要也” (“In terms of that which they preserved, Shè attained to its essentials more than did Yǒu”). It seems that there remained some confusion among Zhū Xī’s disciples, and thus in three entries in the Zhūzǐ Yǔlèi, speaking of the saying “preserving qì is not as good as preserving yuē (守氣不如守約),” Zhū reiterates that “it is not a matter of preserving that ‘yuē’ but that what is preserved is [described as] ‘yuē’ (不是守那約，言所守者約耳).”<sup>3</sup>

Western interpretations have tended to follow the reading of Zhū Xī’s disciples, treating yuē as the object of shǒu (Legge, “what was of most importance,” Lau, “the essential,” Riegel, “something essential”). I would like to reaffirm the traditional interpretation against that preferred in Western Sinology, wherein yuē is one of the possible objects of the verb shǒu. The problem with this interpretation lies in the fact that if we follow it, then what Mèngshī Shè preserves or maintains keeps changing: first, in contrast to Běigōng Yǒu, he preserves “something essential,” whereas in the second instance he preserves his “vital energy,” while Zēng Zǐ now preserves “something essential.” Riegel **Reflections** 453 n21 admits that it is “difficult to know” why this is so. The problem is resolved if we return to the traditional reading and take yuē as the aspect of comparison, rather than as the object of the verb. Further evidence in favor of the that reading will be given in §3 below.

### 2. That Zēng Zǐ Too Guarded Over His “Vital Energy”

If yuē is not the object of shǒu in these two instances, then what is? In my reading, the answer for both is clearly supplied by the second: qì 氣, “vital energy.” Mèngshī Shè guarded over his qì more firmly than did Běigōng Yǒu, and Zēng Zǐ in turn guarded over his qì more firmly than did Mèngshī Shè.

<sup>3</sup>Li Zhūzǐ 1234-1235.

This results in a logically smooth rendering, but differs markedly from traditional interpretations insofar as it takes qì as the object of shǒu for *all three* figures. For Zhào Qí, the object of shǒu is different for Mèngshī Shè and Zēng Zǐ: 施舍雖守勇氣，不如曾子守義之爲約也 “Although Shīshè maintains courageous energy, this is not equal to Zēng Zǐ’s maintenance of propriety in terms of getting the essentials.” Zhū Xī’s interpretation is similar, now stated in terms of the neo-Confucian distinction between qì and lǐ 理 “[innate] principles.” Běigōng Yǒu and Mèngshī Shè maintain the former, whereas Zēng Zǐ maintains the latter (see Mèngzǐ Jízhù, and especially the Zhūzǐ Yǔlèi p1234: “Mèngshī Shè works on qì, while Zēng Zǐ works on lǐ 孟施舍就氣上做工夫，曾子就理上做工夫”). Wáng Fūzhī is more ambiguous, stating that while Mèngshī Shè maintains qì, Zēng Zǐ maintains “that from whence qì arises 氣之所從生.” I maintain, however, that the object, qì, should remain the same for all three figures. Let us first examine the sentence here on grammatical grounds: 孟施舍之守氣，又不如曾子之守約也 “Mèngshī Shè’s shǒu-ing of qì was, in turn, not as yuē as the shǒu-ing of Zēng Zǐ.” Having established that yuē is not the object in the second half of the sentence, our first assumption should be that the object there is qì, based on the grammatical rule that when the object of a verb is omitted in the second half of a sentence, it is usually understood to be the same as the object given after the same verb in the first half. A syntactically similar example may be found in MC 7A14: “仁言不如仁聲之入人深也 “Humane words do not enter people as deeply as humane sounds (music).” Rù 入 parallels shǒu 守 as the nominalized verb, rén 人 parallels qì 氣 as object, and shēn 深 parallels yuē 約 as the adjectival aspect of comparison, and in both cases the object and the aspect of comparison are omitted from one half of the sentence because they are understood by context from the other. To make a more exact parallel, we might rearrange the line as follows: 仁言之入人，不如仁聲之入深也 – slightly more awkward, but perfectly possible. In this case, shēn is clearly not the object of rù in the second half of the sentence, but rather it is again rén, understood from context. The same should hold for the line from our present passage, unless we have good reason to assume otherwise.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>It makes sense that if we are going to compare three people in terms of a certain aspect relating to how they perform a certain action, that action would be one and the same for each. While it is possible for more than one action to be compared, both actions would usually be spelled out. We might construct an English illustration. If I tell you that Kenneth Griffey, Jr does not play baseball as well as Michael Jordan plays basketball – that’s fine. But if I tell you: “Kenneth Griffey, Jr does not play baseball as well as Michael Jordan plays,” it sounds nonsensical – because the grammar suggests that we are still referring to baseball in the second case, but our understanding of the facts of the matter leads us to think otherwise, and we are tempted to add the word “basketball” after the second verb. This is exactly the temptation to which Zhào Qí and Zhū Xī succumbed – because, they thought, Zēng Zǐ surely does not maintain his qì; he, alone, *works* on his mind (for Zhū Xī, this was especially necessary given the negative connotations associated with the term qì in his “school of principle” [lǐxué]). After all, does not Mèng Zǐ hold, later in the passage, that we should ‘not seek from the qì what cannot be attained from the mind 不得於心，勿求於氣,’ and (still later) urge us to “maintain your [mind’s] intent, do not let your qì explode forth 持其志，無暴其氣?” But these latter may just as easily be used in support of my interpretation, as we shall see shortly.

## 3. On the Meanings of Shǒu and Yuē

If we grant the probability of these arguments, it is still necessary to show that a coherent reading of the passage as a whole can result from them. Let us begin with the terms themselves. Shǒu 守 “to guard” appears in such phrases as shǒu mén 守門 “guard a gate,” and shǒu chéng 守城 “guard a city wall.” Shǒu can also have the meaning “preserve” or “maintain.” In the case of qì, it is probably a combination of the two: by guarding over your qì, you keep it from exploding forth indiscriminately. This in turn serves to preserve qì – or, in the case of the hào rán zhī qì 浩然之氣, allows it to continue to grow. The term yuē 約 has the primary sense of “to bind something up with string,” and thus as an adjective, “firmly bound, tight;” the senses of “simple,” “frugal,” “essential,” etc. are extensions of this basic meaning. Shǒu yuē can thus be taken in the sense of “keeping a tight guard over [something],” “holding [it] firmly in check.” The two characters do appear elsewhere, in various senses, in pre-Qin literature. In the Xún Zǐ, we have a clear case of a nominalized-verb + adjective structure: in speaking of the enlightened ruler who does not meddle in trivial affairs but merely selects and leads capable ministers, the Xún Zǐ states that “his overseeing is most concise, and yet detailed [in its results]; his tasks are most relaxed, and yet accomplished [in their results] 守至約而詳，事至佚而功 ” (chapter 9, Wáng Zhì). This differs slightly from the way I understand the terms in the Mèng Zǐ passage (indeed, it is closest to Wáng Fūzhī’s reading), but the syntactic similarity is particularly worth noting. The real clincher as far as the syntax goes, however, comes from elsewhere in the Mèng Zǐ itself (7:32): “Where words 言 are near 近 and yet their purport is far-reaching, these are ‘good words;’ where [one’s self-] guarding/maintenance 守 is firm/concise 約, and yet its application [to others] is wide-spread, this is the ‘good course’ 言近而指遠者，善言也；守約而施博者，善道也.” Shǒu 守 here is clearly parallel to the nominal yán 言 “words,” of the previous line, as is yuē 約 to the adjectival jìn 近 “near” – though some translators of this passage have ignored the parallelism and translated shǒu yuē again as a verb-object structure.

It is true that Zēng Zǐ worked primarily on his mind, and only secondarily on his qì – that he maintained the former to control the latter. But this presents no problem if we take shǒu not in the sense of “maintain” or “concentrate on,” but rather as “to guard over,” “keep in check.” In my reading, shǒu refers not to “maintaining” the mind’s will (持其志), but rather to “not letting” the qì “explode forth” (無暴其氣) in the example, quoted above, from later in the passage.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>I am following Zhào Qí’s reading of bào 暴. But let us note that even if we follow Riegel’s reading of bào as “desiccate” – which has the strength of the Lǐ Jì behind it – it ultimately makes no difference; in effect, to let one’s qì erupt forth is to desiccate it.

Běigōng Yǒu's flaw was precisely his inability to keep his vital energy in check – he let it erupt forth indiscriminately whenever something angered him. He was unable to channel his energy toward higher ends, preferring to meet with death at the hands of some feudal lord rather than suffer the slightest insult. Mèngshī Shè was somewhat better in this than him, since he was able to concentrate his energy on the battle before him and remain undisturbed by other considerations. He did not allow his energy to react to the prospects of winning or losing, and kept it directed toward the confrontation regardless. Yet only Zēng Zǐ (after Kǒng Zǐ) could claim a true mastery of mind over vital energy – to the point where fearlessness was totally determined by and responsive to moral considerations. His was the truly great courage which became synonymous with moral uprightness – it was the courage to do what was right and not to do what was wrong. It is in this sense, I believe, that Zēng Zǐ's ability to “keep a firm guard over his vital energy” is to be understood.

### Conclusion

Our comprehension of the lines in question is key to our understanding of the passage as a whole – not to mention its relation to contemporary Warring States discourse. The door to moral fortitude hinges on the relationship between the mind (xīn 心) and the vital energy – the former must maintain firm control over the latter, and thus: “to not search for, in your vital energy, that which you do not obtain through your mind, is allowable” (paragraph 3:2). “For the mind's intent is the commander of the vital energy, and the vital energy is the filling of the body. For wherever the mind's intent arrives, the vital energy sets up camp. Thus I say: ‘maintain your mind's intent; do not let your vital energy erupt forth’” (paragraph 3:2). It is like the relationship between a general and his troops. It is under the discipline, training, and direction of the mind that the vital energy is able to gather strength as a unified force with a clear-cut objective, so that it may proceed forth like a turbulent river rushing onward *between* its banks. Likewise, the mind is provided with the courage and fortitude to follow through on what it now knows intuitively to be right, precisely because it has harnessed the full strength of this onrushing energy – the commander has the power of his troops behind him. Seen thus, that Zēng Zǐ would expend so much effort “guarding over” his vital energy should not appear to us any stranger than the fact that a commander must constantly train and discipline his soldiers if he is to ever have them follow his “moral” lead. The connection between these two parts of the passage becomes much clearer once the notion of “guarding over the vital energy” is properly and consistently understood.

### Comment

*E Bruce Brooks (2002)*

In MC 7B32, 守約 should indeed be SV by parallel with 言近 in the same passage. I am not sure that this can be carried back to 2A2, where the internal parallel is VO, and I wonder if passages of such different date (I interpret MC 2A2 as a memory of a conversation with Mencius, c0305, whereas there are indications that MC 7 is from the mid 03c) need to imply the same conception of inner psychophysical resources.

What seems clear in 2A2 is that Běigūng Yǒu’s bellicosity is inferior to Mǐngshī Shǐ’s courage, which is not temperamental, but rather cultivated despite knowing the dangers he faces (compare the preference for planning over bravado in LY \*7:11), and that the latter in turn is not as good as Dzǐngdǐ’s more frugal 守約. In what does Dzǐngdǐ’s superiority consist? Perhaps not in bellicosity as such, nor even in courage in the face of the uncertain, though that is better, but in a consciousness of rectitude which makes fear irrelevant, and courage in the usual sense superfluous.

All this talk of courage may strike the modern reader as surprisingly military, but military was in the air at the end of the 04c. As we reconstruct the chronology, it was at just that time that military thinking (the Sūndǐ) and meditational thinking (the Dào/Dǐ Jīng) were not only evolving in parallel, but were borrowing from each other. A contemporary reader, it seems to me, would easily have recognized Běigūng Yǒu as the kind of rashly aggressive general who is faulted in Sūndǐ 8, a general who can be defeated by an opponent who is *not* the slave of his own aggressive instincts, and uses the other’s bellicosity against him. Měngshī Shǐ is more detached from the goal, and to that extent more likely to win: at once more rational and more successful. He seems more like Dzǐngdǐ, a figure whom the real Mencius seems to have admired, and whose less conventionally “courageous” version of duty is noted in MC 4B31.

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