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Mencius and Lǎu Dān

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Abstract

The dates of Mencius and Lǎu Dān have been distorted in transmission, but can be recovered with sufficient care. For Mencius, a tradition of his birth and death has been doctored to make it possible for Mencius to have foreseen the 0286 Chí conquest of Sùng (as he is said to do in MC 3B5). The original dates show that Mencius died in 0303, twenty years before that conquest, and that MC 3B5 (written more than a generation after the Chí conquest) is after all anachronistic.

For Lǎu Dān, we have the transmission genealogy in Shǐ Jì 63. This was written by Szmǎ Tán, who had studied with the most prominent Dàoist master of the day, but it too has been distorted, in order to attribute to Lǎu Dān a supposed prediction of the rise of the unified Empire. The corrected lifespans are:

Mencius: 0386-0303 (84 years)

Lǐ Dān: 0375-0286 (80 years)

Study of the historical connections of the Dào/Dé Jīng shows that that text accumulated over more than a century, so that Lǐ Dān cannot have been responsible for all of it; instead, he was the second of three masters whose pronouncements the DDJ contains.

From their dates, we can see that Mencius was an older contemporary of Lǐ Dān. From Taeko's earlier study of the meditation aspect of MC 2A2, it becomes probable that Mencius was an early student in the DDJ school, under Lǐ Dān's predecessor as head of that school, a person to whom the Hwánándǔ gives the name Shāng Rúng. Studying the changes in doctrine in the accretional DDJ identifies a point at which the change of leadership occurred, a point at which some left for Chí, where they founded their own school, whose earliest text is the Nèi Yè. From the appearance of the key Mencian term *hàurán jr chì* 浩然之氣 in the Nèi Yè, *but not in the DDJ*, it is clear that Mencius' ultimate affinities on the meditation side were with this Chí school, and not with the Lù school under the direction of his younger contemporary, Lǐ Dān.

We can now pose some new questions about Mencius and meditation. If Mencius was a student under Shāng Rúng, did the teachings of Shāng Rúng have any effect on Mencius' later political philosophy? Did Mencius himself have any effect on the ideas of Shāng Rúng? This paper will briefly consider that question, and will answer both parts of it with a modest Yes.

The moral of the exercise is that it is not enough to read one passage of the Mencius or the Dào/Dé Jīng, we must read it together with the rest of that text. We must also read the two in their context as mutually aware enterprises. And we must recognize that other contemporary texts, such as the Gwǎndǔ, the Mwòdǔ, and the Sywǎndǔ, also contain relevant material. In short, classical Chinese philosophy must be read entire, if any part of it is to be fully understood.