Mengzi: *Læra om det gode mennesket* (Mengzi, The Teaching about the Benevolent Man). Translated from Chinese with an Introduction and Commentary by Ole Bjørn Rongen. Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1994. 352 pp.

In the work under review Ole Bjørn Rongen presents an integral translation of *Mengzi* into Norwegian, a sequel to his 1988 translation of *Lunyu*.

In his preface Rongen states that his translation is aimed at an audience comprising sinologists, students of Chinese, historians of philosophy, as well as the general reader. I find it more plausible to suppose that the book has been written primarily with students of classical Chinese in mind — though Rongen nowhere burdens the reader with involved grammatical analysis, his literal translation should make it easy for students of classical Chinese to decipher the *Mengzi* and the notes he supplies in such abundance generally present glosses of a kind potentially useful for such students. These features do not, however, make *Mengzi* more accessible to historians of philosophy or to the general reader — quite the contrary.

In his introduction Rongen appears principally concerned with explaining the events, states, persons, texts, etc., mentioned in *Mengzi* that the general reader (as well as the beginning student of classical Chinese) will not be acquainted with. Though Rongen introduces the various schools of thought represented by the persons Mengzi relates to and paraphrases passages in which Mengzi presents his

own key ethical terms, both the general reader and the historian of philosophy will probably regret the absence of a more reflective discussion of the concerns of early Chinese philosophy and how Mengzi relates to them. To the general reader it must be especially confusing to have such a large quantity of names and concepts paraded in front of him, with frequent (and unnecessary) use of transcribed terms that can mean nothing to him.

Before his translation Rongen presents a brief analysis of the composition of the various chapters of *Mengzi* and a thematic index, both commendable features. The translation is followed by a bibliography of Western and Chinese works consulted by Rongen and an index to proper names that occur in the introduction, translation and notes.

As Rongen states in his preface, his translation is as literal as he has found defensible, interpretations being relegated to the notes appended each translated section. Rongen apparently aims not only to avoid translating words that do not occur in the original text, but also to mirror in his translation the actual sentence structure used in *Mengzi*. He nowhere discusses why he has chosen to translate in this way. To the present reviewer this kind of minimal translation is difficult to defend on methodological grounds, but one cannot deny that it does supply students of classical Chinese with a potentially useful key to the text.

In order to avoid my own idiosyncrasies, I have compared a number of sections with the translation into modern Chinese made by Yang Bojun, also recognized as authoritative by Rongen, finding a number of debatable passages. In IIB1, for instance, I count five straightforward mistakes and IVA20 surely begins with a mistake of an elementary nature. But generally speaking the translation appears to be quite accurate.

The feature of Rongen's translation that strikes one first is its extremely high number of notes (163 in Book One alone). One wonders how previous translators, such as the late Søren Egerod (partial translation into Danish 1955) or D.C. Lau (integral translation into English 1970) managed to convey the meaning of *Mengzi* in a way useful both to the general reader and the sinologist with hardly any notes at all, and the answer is quite simple: most of Rongen's notes are superfluous. But superfluity is one thing — those who take seriously the task of introducing Chinese literature to a wider public are bound to have given some thought to the problem of just how many

notes it takes to scare away the general reader, especially if the notes concerned contain lengthy discussions employing transcribed phrases. The generally recognized answer is, I believe: as few as possible. Sinologists and historians of philosophy are also likely to be more interested in the nuances conveyed by a translation with close attention to style and context, rather than a one-to-one translation appended a series of notes. Very often one finds notes that are curiously inconclusive — after having read about a number of conflicting interpretations advanced by previous commentators, one expects to find the conclusion Rongen has reached after reviewing the evidence — but is disappointed. One also often encounters notes where the interpretations of the ancient commentators are presented at length, only to be dismissed by Rongen as evidently faulty — so why introduce them in the first place?

In sum, I believe Rongen would have presented us (Scandinavians) with a more useful and enjoyable book if he had discarded 95 percent of his notes, written a longer and more "philosophical" introduction, and — first of all — if he had trusted his own (uncontested) understanding of the content and context of *Mengzi* and had presented us with a translation in which he self-confidently rendered the ideas and attitudes expressed in the text he translates in the manner he understood them and in a way that would be natural to his target language.

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