


## Article

# Interstate Relational Ethics: Mengzi and Later Mohists in Dialogue

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**Abstract:** The popular interpretation holds that Mengzi was strongly critical of Mozi because the Mohist moral theory was antithetical to Confucian relational ethics. According to this interpretation, Mohism promotes the norm of “impartiality” or “impartial care”, which violates the Confucian norms of “filial piety” and “graded love”. Accordingly, Mengzi thought that the Confucian ideal would not be realized if Mohism continued to prevail. Scholars have tried to nuance and revise this dominant interpretation. For example, some have pointed out the importance of family-oriented values in Mohist ethical theory, arguing that Mengzi likely misunderstood or purposefully misrepresented Mohism. This article is an initial attempt to modify the popular interpretation by arguing that the debate between Mengzi and Mohist regarding relational ethics is predominantly about the relations between *states* rather than *individuals*. This interpretation sheds light on a core difference between Confucian and Mohist ethical theories and can help make better sense of some later Mohist passages.

**Keywords:** Confucianism; Mohism; Mengzi; Mozi; interstate relations

## 1. Introduction

Scholars of Confucianism are familiar with Mengzi’s 孟子 criticisms of Mozi 墨子.<sup>1</sup> For example, a passage from the Mengzi (*The Book of Master Meng*) states the following:

聖王不作，諸侯放恣，處士橫議，楊朱、墨翟之言盈天下。天下之言，不歸楊，則歸墨。楊氏為我，是無君也；墨氏兼愛，是無父也。無父無君，是禽獸也。……楊墨之道不息，孔子之道不著，是邪說誣民，充塞仁義也。

A sage king has not arisen, and territorial rulers perpetrate whatever evils they please. Advisors who do not hold offices make arbitrary suggestions, among which the words of Yang Zhu and Mo Di are the most prevalent. The suggestions that one can hear these days are the views of either Yang or Mo. Now, Yang’s suggestion is to “care for oneself”, which is tantamount to turning one’s back on one’s ruler. Mo’s suggestion is to “care for all”, which is tantamount to turning one’s back on one’s father. However, to acknowledge neither king nor father is to be in the state of a beast. Unless the doctrines of Yang and Mo are suppressed, and those of Kongzi (re)gain prominence, perverse theses will delude the people, and the path of benevolence and righteousness will be blocked. (*Mengzi*, 3B9)<sup>2</sup>

Mengzi’s criticisms are emotional and harsh; he even calls Mozi a beast (*qin shou* 禽獸) and debunks Mozi’s theses as “perverse” (*xie shuo* 邪說). Scholars have explored various possible explanations for why Mengzi finds Mozi’s theses so reprehensible. As moral terms are used in Mengzi’s criticism, scholars generally believe that Mengzi has qualms with Mozi because his ethical theory is incompatible with Confucianism. As Mengzi puts it, if Mozi’s theory continues to prevail, then the path of benevolence and righteousness will be blocked. In this context, one question for scholars to answer is which theses of



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Mohism are “perverse” for Mengzi. The most popular theory holds that the Mohist thesis of “impartial care” (*jian ai* 兼愛) is antithetical to Confucian relational ethics, particularly regarding the Confucian norms of “filial piety” (*xiao* 孝) and “graded love” (*ai you cha deng* 愛有差等) (Van Norden 2011, pp. 87–88). However, as scholars have noted, some textual evidence in Mozi 墨子 (*The Book of Master Mo*) suggests that Mohism endorses family values and the norm of filial piety, even resorting to these normative ideas to defend the value of “impartiality” (Radice 2011; Chiu 2013; Andreini 2014). To solve this puzzle, I argue that Mengzi’s qualms with Mozi’s ethics have to do with the norms that regulate the relationship between *states* rather than *individuals* and that a core theme of their debate revolves around interstate warfare.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation can explain not only Mengzi’s criticisms of Mozi but also the later Mohists’ response to Mengzi.

### 1.1. The Strategy of Ending War with War: Mengzi’s Solution to the Warring States Crisis

The Warring States period was a time of political upheaval and military conflict in ancient China. It was characterized by larger-scale, mass-based warfare (Zhao 2011, pp. 102–47; Galvany 2021). The states were either engaged in or preparing for war to strive to survive or to expand their territories and further their power over others. When the early masters traveled between different states to meet the state rulers and sell their theories and strategies, they did so in this historical context. The theories and strategies they wanted state rulers to accept and put into practice, therefore, are very likely pertinent to immediate, geostrategic concerns and planning. Mengzi might not be an exception. For example, King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 sought guidance from Mengzi on how to establish hegemony (*Mengzi*, 1A7). Mengzi refused to speak of hegemony; instead, he suggested changing the topic to the kingly way (*wang dao* 王道). King Hui of Liang 梁惠王 asked Mengzi how the latter could benefit the Liang state (5A1). Mengzi refused to speak of benefit; he, again, changed the topic to the kingly way. The popular interpretation reads these paragraphs as Mengzi lecturing the kings against “unethical” hegemony or benefit-oriented rule and hoping to promote benevolent governance instead. As I have argued elsewhere (Lee 2017, 2021), Mengzi’s advice of the kingly way was that King Xuan should have learned to become a true king (*wang* 王), namely, Son of Heaven, rather than learning about the strategy of a regional superpower. As Mengzi rightly suggested, the era of hegemony was over. In the Warring States period, the rulers of the powerful states were no longer “dukes”. They had taken the title of “king”. The wars of the time were not launched in the name of revering the Zhou king. They were launched by kings, often with the intent to annex other states (Zhao 2011). Therefore, Mengzi advised the king of Qi not to learn from the strategies of the hegemony, such as Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公 and Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 (they were “dukes”). Mengzi said, “If you will have me speak, let it be about (the enterprise of becoming) the true king” (*Mengzi*, 1A7).<sup>4</sup> This reveals a core feature of Mengzi’s theory of the kingly way: it is about installing a new king of a new dynasty to solve the Warring States crisis.<sup>5</sup>

孟子見梁襄王。出，語人曰：「望之不見人君，就之而不見所畏焉。卒然問曰：『天下惡乎定？』吾對曰：『定于一。』」

Mengzi went to see King Xiang of Liang. After the meeting, he said to some people, “When I looked at him from a distance, he did not appear like a sovereign; when I came close to him, I saw nothing venerable about him. Abruptly he asked me, ‘How can all under Heaven be settled?’ I replied, ‘It will be settled by being united [under one regime]’”. (1A6)

Mengzi was convinced that having all under Heaven united by one sovereign (*ding yu yi* 定于一) was the only approach to restoring peace and order. Many early political advisors shared this idea. The *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (*Mr. Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*), for example, states that to unify all under Heaven, a king should be installed (17/8.1). However, given the Warring States situation, military unification seemed to be the most possible option. Therefore, only a ruler who had a strong military force could achieve it (22/4.2–4.3)<sup>6</sup>. Mengzi held similar opinions, so he sold the kingly way mainly to powerful states, such as Wei 魏 and Qi 齊. When Duke Wen of Teng 滕文公 sought advice from Mengzi concerning interstate politics, Mengzi said bluntly to him that he had no plots to offer because Teng was too weak. The only thing the duke could do was probably to prepare to die in a war of defense (*Mengzi*, 1B20).

Since killing and war were unavoidable in realizing the kingly way, Mengzi considered the “virtue” of not enjoying slaughtering necessary. “One who does not take pleasure in killing can unify it” (*bu shi sha ren zhe neng yi zhi* 不嗜殺人者能一之) (1A6). For the same reason, he emphasized the quality of being empathetic to the suffering of others. A benevolent ruler could not bear to see animals and people die even though he still must have them killed when circumstances require this (1A7). In other words, assuming that war was the most feasible solution, Mengzi formulated certain ethical principles to restrict the use of violence and reminded the rulers of the importance of benevolence.

To summarize this solution to the Warring States crisis, the slogan “the war to end war” from the First World War may be a useful analogy. As mentioned earlier, the Warring States period was characterized by frequent military conflicts between states. As a result, the states faced crises, such as declining fertility and food shortages, and their people died due to war and famine. In this context, some ancient thinkers advocated the solution of launching wars to unite all under Heaven and establish a new dynasty to end wars.

This solution echoes the *Sima fa* 司馬法 (*Sima's Principles of War*), which lays out the norms of the use of force. It states explicitly that if one starts a war with the intent of ending a war, then this war is justified.

古者，以仁為本以義治之之為正。正不獲意，則權。權出於戰，不出於中人。是故，殺人安人，殺之可也；攻其國愛其民，攻之可也。以戰止戰，雖戰可也。<sup>7</sup>

In antiquity, governing the people according to the fundamental principles of benevolence and righteousness was regarded as the standard [*zheng* 正]. When the standard failed to produce the expected results, rulers resorted to expediency [*quan* 權]. One resorts to expediency from the exigency of war rather than from an attempt to appease the people. For this reason, if one kills to bring peace to the people, then killing is permissible; if one attacks a state to care for its people, then attacking it is permissible. If one starts a war to stop a war, then even war is permissible.

That the ideal of attacking a state to protect its people and ending the war with war would gain currency in the Warring States period may not be surprising.<sup>8</sup> The popularity of the ideal resulted from the then circumstances. Moreover, it could be traced to the Zhou rites, as depicted in the *Sima fa*. Today, scholars may group the *Sima fa* together with other early military texts. However, according to the *Hanshu* 漢書 (*The Book of Han*) bibliography, the *Sima fa* is a classic (Ban 1964, p. 1709). Many scholars believe that the *Sima fa* is a part of the *Zhouli* 周禮 (*Rites of Zhou*) (Cai 2017). As Kongzi claimed to endorse and follow the Zhou rites (*Analects* 3.14), his later-day follower Mengzi may likely have been influenced by the military ethics of the *Sima fa*.

The *Sima fa* says that the act of resorting to killing or war is *quan* 權—that is, expediency or an expedient measure. One implication of the notion of *quan* is a temporary suspension of the standard (*zheng* 正): to exercise *quan* (an expedient measure), a ruler should temporarily put aside the *zheng* (standard principle) of benevolence and righteousness, namely, the principle of non-violence. However, to care for the people and end a war, a ruler could resort to violence as a *quan*. It violates the standard principle of benevolence

that implies non-violence, but it still coheres with the normative ideas of benevolence and righteousness of caring for the people and punishing the evil.

Mengzi used the analogy of rescuing a sister-in-law to explain the notion of *quan*. In ordinary circumstances, a man should adhere to the principles; that is, he should not touch his sister-in-law physically. However, a temporary suspension of the principle is permissible if he must rescue his drowning sister-in-law with his hand.

男女授受不親，禮也。嫂溺援之以手者，權也。

For males and females, not allowing their hands to touch in giving and receiving is a general principle. When a sister-in-law is drowning, to rescue her with the hand is *quan*. (4B17)

Exercising *quan* implies a temporal suspension of a general principle, but it is acceptable if the situation requires that other norms override the general principle. Mengzi utilizes this analogy to elaborate on the value of *quan* and the task of rescuing all under Heaven. It says, “All under Heaven is drowning; it must be rescued with the [kingly] way”. (4B17)

It is not surprising that other ancient thinkers would find the *Sima fa* principle problematic. Intuitively speaking, if war is evil and entails the sacrifice of human life, it can hardly be ethical to use war as a means to end wars and care for the people. More importantly, as has been mentioned, the *Sima fa* is a classic. It lays out the military principles for the Son of Heaven rather than state rulers. As the highest authority, a Son of Heaven could order troops to punish a state for its initiation of a war. Yet, in terms of interstate relations, it would be controversial to argue that a state can attack another state to care for its people; that is, *Sima fa's quan* could not be used to justify interstate warfare. Mohism, for example, saliently opposed interstate warfare.

A core thesis of Mohism argues against military aggression (Loy 2015; Fraser 2016). As scholars have noted, Mohism is closer to modern just war theory than Confucianism in that for Mohism; only self-defense constitutes a justified military act for a *state*.

今遷夫好攻伐之君，又飾其說以非子墨子曰：「以攻伐之為不義，非利物與？昔者禹征有苗，湯伐桀，武王伐紂，此皆立為聖王，是何故也？」子墨子曰：「子未察吾言之類，未明其故者也。彼非所謂攻，謂誅也。」 (Mozi 19.5)

Nowadays, those rulers who favor offensive warfare embellish their arguments to refute Master Mo Zi by saying, “Do you take offensive warfare to be unrighteous and not to be beneficial in affairs? In former times, Yu reduced the You Miao, Tang overthrew Jie, and King Wu overthrew Zhou, yet they were all established as sage kings. How do you account for this?” Master Mo Zi said, “You have not considered the category of my words, nor have you understood their basis. What they did is not called ‘attack’; it is called ‘punishment.’” (Johnston 2009, pp. 188–89)

Some territorial rulers argued against Mozi by pointing out that Mozi approved of the sage kings’ deeds of attacking rebellious tribes and tyrants. Mozi replied by saying that they failed to notice the type of military act he approved. Yu’s and King Wu’s military acts were punishments instead of invasions because they were chosen by Heaven to be the top authorities. Thus, Mozi categorized their acts as “punishment”, while the interstate invasion the territorial rulers tried to defend was an “attack”. The same passage continues to describe the anomalies that took place when the sage kings had to punish the wrongdoers. As Yuri Pines says, “Only a comparable accumulation of omens and portents would justify war or rebellion” (Pines 2008, p. 11). For Mohism, only the man who is chosen to be the Son of Heaven by Heaven can resort to force to end wars.

Mengzi, by contrast, advised Qi 齊 to attack another state, Yan 燕. The *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (*Stratagems of the Warring States*) says, “Meng Ke told King Xuan of Qi, ‘Now attacking Yan is the opportunity of becoming King Wen and King Wu, you should not miss it.’” (Lee 2017). As recorded by the *Mengzi*, Mengzi’s contemporaries also believed that Mengzi wanted to help the king of Qi become the Son of Heaven (2B21).

Keeping in mind the aforementioned tensions between Mozi’s and Mengzi’s thoughts, we can make sense of Mengzi’s reproach to Mozi for advocating the principle of “impartial care” and strictly adhering to it (*zhi* 執). If Mohism continued to grow in popularity and even became the dominant theory, there would be no room to exercise expedient measures (Mengzi, 7A26). In a nutshell, Mengzi found Mohism problematic because it defended the principle of “impartiality” and adhered to it uncompromisingly. If the associated anti-military aggression thesis prevailed, no one would consider the proposal of helping a state ruler end wars with wars, which was considered by Mengzi the most feasible solution to the Warring States crisis.

Regardless of whether we find Mengzi’s proposal ethical, if we share his belief that a single-state ruler conquering all other states and installing a new dynasty is the only feasible approach to ending the Warring States situation, we may be sympathetic to his proposal. In addition, his proposal echoes the moral intuition that certain radical circumstances may require one to engage in a necessary evil, such as killing and war. If this is the case, then *quan* (an expedient measure) is likely to be a normative idea that most people would accept. Therefore, to defend their anti-war thesis, Mohists needed to answer the question of whether they endorsed or disapproved of the normative idea of *quan*.

### 1.2. Mohist Response: Interstate War Is Not the Answer

Later Mohists did not defend Mozi’s anti-war ethics by dismissing the norm of *quan*. As Mozi (19.5) suggests, Mohism agrees with the *Sima fa* that a Son of Heaven can punish regional rulers. What Mohism disapproves of is military aggression between states. Later Mohists, thus, repudiated Mengzi’s criticism of Mozi by reworking the notion of *quan*.<sup>9</sup>

In the most basic sense, the verb *quan* means “to weigh” (Defoot 2015). It became a noun with the sense of “expediency” because the act of weighing sometimes involves considering things in relation to one another to see which is heavier or lighter and to decide what should be discarded or sacrificed. Such decisions tend to be dictated by circumstances, and people would rather not make them unless obliged to. Given this reluctance, the *Sima fa* is correct in deploying the notion of *quan* as the act of resorting to war to solve even greater problems: if there were an alternative option, the Son of Heaven would rather clearly adhere to the moral standard and not start a war. However, the “Daqu” 大取 (“Greater Selection”) chapter of *Mozi* points out that Mengzi wrongly applied *quan* to interstate military conflicts.<sup>10</sup> The “Daqu” chapter illustrates this point by analyzing the semantics of *quan*. The argument goes as follows: “Weighing the lightness and heaviness of the things that one considers parts of one’s body is what we call *quan*” (*yu suoti zhizhong quan qingzhong, zhiwei quan* 於所體之中而權輕重，之謂權). This clarification is similar to the meaning of *quan* used by Mengzi. However, the “Daqu” introduces the notion of *ti* 體 (body or unity) to re-clarify *quan*. As mentioned earlier, sometimes, by weighing things against each other, a person decides which thing is more important and which is to be discarded or sacrificed. In such a situation, the “Daqu” emphasizes that the things being weighed must belong to the same *ti*. This idea is elaborated further using a body-part analogy:

斷指以存腕，利之中取大，害之中取小也。害之中取小也，非取害也，取利也。其所取者，人之所執也。

Cutting off a finger to keep the wrist means choosing [qu 取] the greater among the benefits and the lesser among the harms. Choosing the lesser among the



harms is not choosing harms but rather choosing benefits. One should adhere to [zhi 執] this principle when choosing. (Sun 2007, p. 404)

Remember that Mengzi complained that Mozi's "impartial care" principle and "strictly adhering to" (zhi 執) it meant that Mohism could not appreciate *quan*. Both *qu* and *zhi* are key terms in his criticism of Yang Zhu and Mozi (Mengzi, 7A26). Using the finger–wrist example, Mohists illustrated why "strictly adhering to" a principle was compatible with *quan* practice. When faced with a situation of which body part to sacrifice in order to protect another, every normal person would rather sacrifice the less important part. In such a situation, everyone will choose to sacrifice a finger to keep the wrist. The logic is simple: the parts being weighed against each other belong to the same body of the person. If the finger and the wrist belonged to different bodies, the person would probably sacrifice someone else's wrist, or even arms and legs, to keep his finger. This illustration suggests that an act of *quan* is valid and moral only when the saved and sacrificed parts belong to the same body or unity. In this regard, Mengzi either misunderstood or manipulated the term *quan*.

Let us revisit the *Sima fa* passage about the idea of ending the war with war, "If one attacks a state to care for its people, then attacking it is permissible". This statement means that it is permissible for a Son of Heaven to attack a state if the state maltreats the people because the people are the Son of Heaven's people. However, Mengzi, neglecting the *ti* principle, applied the *Sima fa* idea to interstate relations to justify interstate wars. According to Mengzi's theory, a state ruler invading another state is justified if the ruler of the invaded state maltreats the people, especially when the invasion is welcome by the people of the invaded state (1A5 and 1B18). This theory violates the *ti* principle. In Mengzi's idea of *quan*, the state being attacked did not start the war, and the people sent to the battle were not the people being cared for. Therefore, saying that "killing a group of people to protect another group of people is an expedient measure" is tantamount to saying that "sacrificing my friend's leg to save my toe is an expedient measure". This does not sound right because, as later Mohists pointed out, my friend's leg and my toe do not belong to the same body. Therefore, I cannot claim that my decision to sacrifice my friend's leg is an act of *quan*. Similarly, Mengzi could not claim that a state ruler could resort to *quan* to have some people of his state killed in the war for the sake of the well-being of the people of another state.

Mengzi would probably argue against this Mohist explanation by stating that starting wars to annex and unify other states should be completed for the sake of *all* people because it was the only way to put an end to constant war and the suffering of all under Heaven. As the *Mengzi* emphasizes, only a benevolent and righteous ruler can achieve this end (Lee 2017, 2022). The "Daqu" uses the robbery analogy to counter the Mencian argument:

遇盜人，而斷指以免身，利也；其遇盜人，害也。斷指與斷腕，利於天下相若，無擇也。

When a man encounters a robber, if he can save his own life by cutting off a finger, then doing so is to pursue [the greater] benefit. That he encounters a robber is a misfortune. Whether he cuts off a finger or a wrist, it makes no difference to the benefit of all under Heaven, so there is nothing [for him] to choose between. (Sun 2007, p. 404)

In early Chinese texts, such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (*The Book of Master Zhaung*) and *Han Feizi* 韓非子 (*The Book of Master Han Fei*), *dao* 盜 (a robber) often refers to a person who is not only power hungry but also desirous of fame. In addition to seizing territories and power, such people wish to achieve a reputation for being the most benevolent and righteous.<sup>11</sup> This is the kind of ruler that Mengzi's "ending war with war" theory is likely to appeal to (Lee 2017). Therefore, the "Daqu" says that the existence of robbers is a shared misfortune for all under Heaven. Once you encounter this kind of ruler and are forced to go to war, you are unfortunate. Whether you choose to fight for him in the name of justice or injustice makes no difference to the well-being of other people. Given the principle of the same

body/unity that regulates the *quan* act, no one who is sent by a state ruler to kill others can claim to be rescuing the people of other states.

殺一人以存天下，非殺一人以利天下也。殺己以存天下，是殺己以利天下

To kill one person to ensure the well-being of all under Heaven is not killing one person to benefit all under Heaven. To kill yourself to ensure the well-being of all under Heaven, this is killing oneself to benefit all under Heaven. (Sun 2007, p. 404)

For Mohists, only self-sacrifice for the sake of others qualifies as a benefit to others. It makes no sense for one to say, “I benefit other people by having my uncle killed in the war”. However, one can say, “I benefit other people by sacrificing my own life”. In short, although the Mencian proposal of rescuing all under Heaven may sound “ethical”, it does not consider who is going to be sacrificed for whose well-being and whether people would be willing to be sacrificed for his proposal.

### 1.3. The Mohist Proposal: An Alternative Mode of Regime Change

In addition to refuting the Mencian proposal of supporting an ethical territorial ruler who would end the war with war, the Mohists proposed an alternative solution—a different mode of regime change.

The Mohist theory also aimed to end the crisis of the Warring States. After many years of constant war, the surviving states lacked workers and daily supplies. Adult males had been sent to the battlefields, away from their families and farm work. They either died in war or from famine. As Mengzi lamented, the dysfunctional Zhou dynasty should have been replaced by a new regime, yet it remained nominally in power (Mengzi, 2B13). Because it was unlikely that the Zhou would regain authority and restore order, many believed that only a regime change—an establishment of a new dynasty—could put an end to interstate conflict. Mengzi was convinced that in the Warring States situation, regime change could only happen if one sovereign established a new dynasty by conquering and unifying all other states (Mengzi, 1A6). Thus, his proposal was to accelerate this process by supporting some territorial rulers in conquering others. However, the Mohists disagreed with the Mencian proposal. They urged all states to stop participating in warfare and to concentrate on postwar economic recovery and population growth. They argued that interstate relations could be harmonized if all territorial rulers followed Heaven and changed their mindset of “excluding others” (*bie* 別) to one of “impartial caring” (*jian* 兼). If all rulers switched to a *jian* mindset, they would care for all people in the world. Accordingly, they would not consider attacking other states permissible.

To facilitate this solution, Mohism tends to endorse meritocracy-based regime change for tackling the Warring States crisis. It urges state rulers to dedicate themselves to benefiting the people and argues that Heaven will give the utmost authority to the person who benefits all under Heaven the most and make him the founder of the new dynasty. According to this account, regime change should not be achieved through military conquests. Mozi argues that all previous regimes were established by Heaven. Heaven did not make dynasty founders Sons of Heaven because they eliminated other states; instead, Heaven installed them based on their merits in benefiting the people. This reminds us of Yu the Great 大禹, the role model of exhausting oneself for the welfare of all under Heaven. Yu the Great was a legendary king who did not found a new dynasty through military operations.<sup>12</sup> This explains why the *Liezi* 列子 (*The Book of Master Lie*) claims that for Mohism, Yu the Great was the remedy for the chaos of the Warring States. The model of Yu the Great differs from the Tang-Wu 湯武 model. King Tang and King Wu overthrew the Xia 夏 and Shang 商 dynasties through military operations. Yu the Great, however, devoted himself to the enterprise of benefiting the people by working hard on flood control. While Mengzi also praised Yu and Shun, as Mengzi’s tendency

to plot for powerful states and the story of Qi invading Yan suggest, he believed that Tang–Wu mode of regime change was more feasible for the Warring States.

Although a Mohist solution to the Warring States crisis may seem morally desirable, implementing it was difficult for the ruling elites. As recorded by the *Mozi*, many people doubted the feasibility of the Mohist approach. It is indeed counterintuitive to believe that all states would agree to a sudden cessation of warfare to switch to mutual care, helping each other's postwar reconstruction. As the competitors tended to feel only one step away from achieving their goals, it was unrealistic to expect them to abandon their militaristic attitudes. The weaker powers needed to prepare themselves for war, too; once they lowered their guard, they were very likely to be annexed soon. Therefore, state rulers were inclined to believe that it was easier or even inevitable to continue to engage in warfare. The Mohist theory may have been "plausible" from ethical, theoretical, and utilitarian perspectives, but the ruling elites did not hesitate to send troops as long as they were confident of winning battles, and the Warring States period indeed ended with the violent unification of the empire by one victorious state of Qin 秦.

## 2. Conclusions

Today's international law and just war theory generally disapprove of the idea of ending the war with war, holding that only self-defense is a just cause for a state to go to war. However, during the Warring States period in China, many thinkers and strategists were convinced that having one powerful state conquer and unify all other states and establish a new dynasty was the only feasible approach to end the situation of constant military conflict. Mengzi was one of these thinkers. He believed that the benign version of this approach involved having a benevolent ruler unify all under Heaven with the restricted use of military force. Mozi and his followers criticized this approach. Because war is disastrous, it could not be used as an expedient measure to end all wars. Moreover, applying the ideal of "ending the war with war" to interstate relations violates the same body/unity principle. A state cannot invade another state in the name of caring for the latter's people. Therefore, by reworking the notion of expediency, the Mohists called for a cessation of military competition and advocated an alternative mode of regime change that did not depend on military prowess and success but rather on meritocracy—namely, a person's concrete contributions to the welfare of the people. Whereas Mohist theory might sound more ethical, the end of the Warring States period happened as Mengzi predicted.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Several points made in this article were presented in my earlier work (Lee 2022), which focused on Mengzi's criticisms of Yang Zhu and Mozi and the Mohist and Yangist responses. However, this article focuses on the tensions between Mengzi's thought and Mohism in terms of their interstate relational ethics and feasibility.
- <sup>2</sup> In this article, the translations of the *Mengzi* fragments are my own. I have benefited from the translations provided in Ivanhoe and Van Norden (2001).
- <sup>3</sup> Mohism also repudiates the idea of extending the application of family-oriented value to the relationships between the ruling and the ruled. It advocates political meritocracy in the realm of domestic politics as well as interstate relation.
- <sup>4</sup> As to the implementation of benevolence governance, its aim was to improve people's living condition to make them willing to combat enemy soldiers. (*Mengzi*, 1A5)
- <sup>5</sup> I have argued and defended this interpretation of Mengzi in Lee (2017, 2021, 2022); thus, I will not repeat my arguments in length in the current article. My interpretation is intended to reconstruct what I believe the historical authors of *Mengzi* and



Mozi would have thought. For the different ways of interpreting early philosophy, see [Ivanhoe \(2012\)](#). However, my argument is not to marshal a large amount of “evidence” to “prove” the correctness of my interpretation. An interpretation is an explanation; that is, it should have explanatory power. Thus, to argue that my interpretation is feasible, I demonstrate what my interpretation could explain, such as some Mengzi fragments about the kingly way and the peculiar terminological resonance between Mengzi’s criticism of Mozi and some later Mohist text.

([Knoblock and Riegel 2000](#), pp. 434, 576) and the extensive bibliography here.

The translation is adapted from ([Sawyer and Sawyer 1993](#), p. 126).

Even during the world wars, many believed in the ethics and feasibility of such a solution. Today, most people have realized the danger of such ideals after witnessing the catastrophes of world wars. However, the moral imagination of using war as an instrument to uphold justice continues to persist in today’s world ([Luban 2011](#)).

I assume that the authors of later Mohist texts were aware of Mengzi’s harsh criticism of Mozi and attempted to defend Mozi in their writings. This assumption may not be true, but it could explain why the key terms from Mengzi’s criticism are used intensely in the same chapter of Mozi.

My translations of the “Daqu” are adapted from [Johnston \(2009\)](#). For more information about later Mohist texts, see [Graham \(2003\)](#).

For example, the “Qu Qie” 祛齊 chapter of Zhuangzi alludes to Tian 田, who usurped Qi by practicing benevolence and achieving a moral reputation as a great robber ([Ziporyn 2009](#), p. 63).

The book *Mozi* does not explicitly present Yu’s deeds as constituting a more desirable model of regime change. Rather, as many scholars have argued, different from Confucianism, Mohism tends to promote Yu instead of King Tang and King Wu as the model sage king. See, for example, [Tang \(1986, p. 159\)](#) and [Zhu \(2015, p. 57\)](#).

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