

**SELECTIONS FROM THE MENCIUS:
ON THE DUTY OF MINISTERS TO REPROVE A RULER**

Introduction

Mencius (Mengzi, or Meng Ke) was a particularly powerful advocate for the thought of Confucius. Living in the fourth century BCE, about one hundred years after Confucius, Mencius, too, was concerned about the contradiction between the ideal of a peaceful, unified, hierarchical feudal kingdom and the reality of nearly constant warfare between de facto independent feudal states in which the large and powerful preyed upon and absorbed the smaller and weaker states. Like Confucius, Mencius offered his services to feudal lords. Also like Confucius, Mencius had a more successful career as a teacher than as an official.

Document Excerpts with Questions

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 124-126, 146-147. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

***Selections from the Mencius:
On The Duty of Ministers to Reprove a Ruler***

1B:6 Mencius said to King Xuan of Qi, "Suppose that one of the king's subjects entrusted his wife and children to his friend and journeyed to Chu. On returning he found that he had allowed his wife and children to be hungry and cold. What should he do?"

The king said, "Renounce him."

"Suppose the chief criminal judge could not control the officers. What should he do?"

The king said, "Get rid of him."

"Suppose that within the four borders of the state there is no proper government?"

The king looked left and right and spoke of other things.

1B:8 King Xuan of Qi asked, "Is it true that Tang banished Jie and King Wu assaulted Zhou?"¹

Mencius replied, "This is contained in the records."²

¹ According to tradition, Tang, as the first ruler of the Shang dynasty, was responsible for ousting the depraved Jie, the last ruler of the Xia dynasty. King Wu, as one of the founders of the Zhou dynasty, is credited with deposing the wicked Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang.

² Tang's ousting of Jie is recorded in the *Classic of Documents*, "The Announcement of Zhoughui" and "The Announcement of Tang," and King Wu's removal of Zhou in the *Classic of Documents*, "The Great Declaration" and "The Successful Completion of the War."

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
SELECTIONS FROM THE MENCIUS: ON THE DUTY OF MINISTERS TO REPROVE A RULER**

“For a minister to slay his ruler — can this be countenanced?”

“One who despoils humaneness is called a thief; one who despoils rightness is called a robber. Someone who is a robber and a thief is called a mere fellow. I have heard of the punishment of the fellow Zhou but never of the slaying of a ruler.”

5B:9 King Xuan of Qi asked about high ministers.

Mencius said, “Which high ministers is the king asking about?”

The king said, “Are the ministers not the same?”

“They are not the same. There are ministers who are from the royal line and ministers who are of other surnames.”

The king said, “May I inquire about those who are of the royal line?”

“If the ruler has great faults, they should remonstrate with him. If, after they have done so repeatedly, he does not listen, they should depose him.”

The king suddenly changed countenance.

“The king should not misunderstand. He inquired of his minister, and his minister dares not respond except truthfully.”

The king’s countenance became composed once again, and he then inquired about high ministers of a different surname.

“If the ruler has faults, they should remonstrate with him. If they do so repeatedly, and he does not listen, they should leave.”

Questions:

1. How does Mencius justify a minister reproving or even overthrowing a king?
2. By what process does Mencius imagine a king being removed? Does violence play a role?
3. How do you think this kind of thinking would be received by later emperors in China?
4. Whom does Mencius envision as carrying out a justifiable removal of a king? Why these people, and why not others?
5. Does Mencius’ position as articulated here amount to a theory of democracy? Why or why not?

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
SELECTIONS FROM THE MENCIUS: ON THE DUTY OF MINISTERS TO REPROVE A RULER**

Longer Selection

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 124-126, 146-147. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Selections from the Mencius:
On The Duty of Ministers to Reprove a Ruler

1B:6 Mencius said to King Xuan of Qi, “Suppose that one of the king’s subjects entrusted his wife and children to his friend and journeyed to Chu. On returning he found that he had allowed his wife and children to be hungry and cold. What should he do?”

The king said, “Renounce him.”

“Suppose the chief criminal judge could not control the officers. What should he do?”

The king said, “Get rid of him.”

“Suppose that within the four borders of the state there is no proper government?”

The king looked left and right and spoke of other things.

1B:8 King Xuan of Qi asked, “Is it true that Tang banished Jie and King Wu assaulted Zhou?”³

Mencius replied, “This is contained in the records.”⁴

“For a minister to slay his ruler — can this be countenanced?”

“One who despoils humaneness is called a thief; one who despoils rightness is called a robber. Someone who is a robber and a thief is called a mere fellow. I have heard of the punishment of the fellow Zhou but never of the slaying of a ruler.”

1B:11 The people of Qi having attacked Yan and taken possession of it, the several lords were making plans to rescue Yan. King Xuan said, “Many of the lords are making plans to attack this solitary man. How shall I prepare for them?”

Mencius replied, “Your minister has heard that there was one who with seventy *li* extended his government to the entire realm: this was Tang. I have not heard of one with a thousand leagues who feared others. The *Classic of Documents* says,

When Tang undertook the work of punishment he began with Ge.⁵ The whole world trusted him. When he pursued the work of punishment in the east, the Yi in the west felt aggrieved; when he pursued the work of punishment in the

³ See footnote 1, above.

⁴ See footnote 2, above.

⁵ This quotation, while not exact, is close to the language of “The Announcement of Zhonghui” in the *Classic of Documents*. See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893-1895; reprint, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1979), 180.

**Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on
SELECTIONS FROM THE MENCIUS: ON THE DUTY OF MINISTERS TO REPROVE A RULER**

south, the Di in the north felt aggrieved, saying, “Why does he leave us until last?”⁶

“The people looked to him as to clouds and rainbows in a time of great drought. Those going to market had no need to stop; those tilling the fields were unimpeded. He punished the rulers but comforted the people. He was like timely rain descending, and the people were greatly delighted. The *Classic of Documents* says,

“ ‘We await our ruler; when he comes we will be revived.’⁷

“Now Yan oppressed its people, and the king went and punished it. The people believed he was going to deliver them from out of water and fire and, bringing baskets of rice and pitchers of drink, they welcomed the king’s army. Then to have slain their fathers and elder brothers, bound their sons and younger brothers, destroyed their ancestral temple and carried off their treasured vessels — how can this be condoned? Certainly the world fears the might of Qi. Now the king has doubled his territory but has not practiced humane government: it is this that is setting the troops of the realm in motion. If the king will immediately issue orders to return the captives and stop the removal of the precious vessels, and if he will consult with the people of Yan about withdrawing once a ruler has been installed for them, he may still be able to stop an attack.”

5B:9 King Xuan of Qi asked about high ministers.

Mencius said, “Which high ministers is the king asking about?”

The king said, “Are the ministers not the same?”

“They are not the same. There are ministers who are from the royal line and ministers who are of other surnames.”

The king said, “May I inquire about those who are of the royal line?”

“If the ruler has great faults, they should remonstrate with him. If, after they have done so repeatedly, he does not listen, they should depose him.”

The king suddenly changed countenance.

“The king should not misunderstand. He inquired of his minister, and his minister dares not respond except truthfully.”

The king’s countenance became composed once again, and he then inquired about high ministers of a different surname.

“If the ruler has faults, they should remonstrate with him. If they do so repeatedly, and he does not listen, they should leave.”

⁶ Again, though the wording is slightly different, this quotation is close to the language of “The Announcement of Zhonghui” in the *Classic of Documents*. See Legge, 180-181.

⁷ The language closely resembles “The Announcement of Zhonghui.” See Legge, 181.