THE ETHICS OF THE MOHIST DIALOGUES*

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The Mohist Dialogues are four chapters of the *Mozi* (46–49) consisting of brief conversations between Mozi and various disciples, opponents, and rulers or officials. The first two also present sayings attributed to Mozi. The Dialogues reflect the Mohists at the height of their influence as a sociopolitical reform movement. They depict Mozi traveling to various states and receiving audiences with their rulers, to whom he dispenses moral and political advice. He discusses doctrinal issues with students and outsiders, including several Ru (Confucians, “erudites,” “classicists”), an opponent named Wumazi, who defends an

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1 The content of the four chapters can be summarized very roughly as follows. Chapter 46, “Geng Zhu,” is a mixed collection of anecdotes, conversations, and sayings touching on a variety of themes in Mohist thought. The chapter is named after Geng Zhuzi, a Mohist disciple who appears in its opening anecdote. Chapter 47, “Gui Yi (Valuing Morality),” focuses loosely on moral psychology and moral instruction and comprises mainly sayings ascribed to Mozi. Chapter 48, “Gongmeng,” presents Mohist criticisms of the Ru. (The chapter takes its title from Gongmengzi, a Ru depicted in several conversations with Mozi.) Chapter 49, “Lu Wen” (Questions of Lu), relates conversations tied in various ways to the state of Lu, including several between Mozi and the ruler of Lu. Aside from these general themes, however, chapters 47, 48, and 49 all contain other miscellaneous material as well. On the whole, the Dialogues are organized only very loosely, although their content is doctrinally fairly coherent. A fifth chapter, Chapter 50, “Gongshu,” is sometimes also counted among the Dialogues. This chapter contains a single, extended anecdote about Mozi convincing the king of Chu to call off an attack on Song by explaining how Song defense tactics could counter all nine means of attack invented by Gongshu Pan, a brilliant military engineer employed by Chu. Since, unlike chapters 46–49, this chapter is not a collection of short passages treating doctrinal issues, for the purposes of this essay I will not treat it as part of the Dialogues.

2 Commentators such as Su Shixue have suggested that Wuma was a Ru, either a student of Confucius named Wuma Qi or his son. See *Mozi jiaozhu*, 647. However, in the Dialogues, Wuma is not treated as a representative of the Ru (as, e.g., Gongmengzi is), and he expresses no distinctively Ru views. Moreover, he criticizes the practice, shared by both the Mohists and the Ru, of praising the “former kings” as moral exemplars (46: 101/1–10). These points suggest that he was probably not a Ru.
ethic of self-interest, and a critic named Wu Lü 吳慮, who opposes moral activism, advocating instead self-sufficient living off the land. The Mohist “school” is depicted as a flourishing, disciplined organization that attracts and trains students, recommends them for official posts or dispatches them on military assignments, and is supported by donations from them once they are employed. It is difficult to say to what extent the sayings and events that these texts associate with Mozi, are grounded in historical fact and to what extent they are retrospective embellishments, projections backward from the status and doctrines of later generations of Mohists.

The doctrines and prose style of the Dialogues are more polished than those of the earliest Mohist essays, such as Mozi 11, 14, and 17, which may record the words of Mo Di himself. Unlike the essays in the “Triplets”—the ten sets of three essay-length “chapters,” or pian 篇, that form the Core Chapters of the Mozi (chapters 8–37)—one passage in the Dialogues explicitly arranges the ten core Mohist doctrines into a systematic, coherent platform addressing a range of social and political problems, one or another of which Mohist teachers are to select for initial presentation to a ruler on the basis of the particular problems his state faces (see below). This discussion implies a context in which not only Mozi but his senior disciples have sufficient reputation and social status that they routinely succeed in approaching rulers from “the four quarters”—all parts of the early Chinese world—to offer policy advice. Given the Mohists’ plebeian origins, it seems unlikely that they could have achieved this level of influence within Mozi’s lifetime. So I tentatively suggest that the Dialogues represent the status and doctrines of the movement some time after—perhaps several generations after—Mozi’s death. Some of the conversa-

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3 Outwardly, Wu Lü’s dao (49: 113/13–29) resembles that of the “Agriculturalists,” a movement devoted to economic self-sufficiency. See Graham, Disputers of the Tao, 64–74. He may not be aligned with them, however, since instead of mentioning their patron god the Divine Farmer (Shen Nong 神農), he claims to emulate the sage-king Shun. His position overlaps with some Daoist views, since he advocates a simple lifestyle and opposes the dissemination of explicit moral teachings.

4 Four of the ten Triplets are incomplete, as seven of these thirty chapters are lost. The Core Chapters are sometimes also considered to include a pair of texts entitled “Fei Ru” 非儒 (Against the Ru), one of which is lost. The surviving member of the pair is devoted entirely to criticizing the Ru; its first half resembles a debate handbook recording stock rebuttals of Ru teachings. Since, unlike the Core Chapters, this text is not organized as a coherent presentation of a specific Mohist doctrine, I place it in a separate category from the Core Chapters.

5 A pair of correspondences between the Dialogues and the Confucian Analects offer intriguing hints but no conclusive information as to the Dialogues’ chronology. One passage appears to cite the exchange in Analects 13.16 between Confucius and Zigao, Duke of